

HOPE FOR THE WORST BACKSLIDERS NO. 2452

A SERMON
INTENDED FOR READING ON LORD'S-DAY, FEBRUARY 16, 1896.
DELIVERED BY C. H. SPURGEON,
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“Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come to You; for You are the LORD our God. 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 3:22, 23.

SIN is quite sure to cause sorrow—and the longer the sorrow is delayed, the heavier it will be when it comes. This ship may be long at sea, but it will come home, at last, with a heavy cargo. There was never a man who broke the law of God who had not in the end to rue it. “He that digs a pit shall fall into it, and who breaks a hedge, a serpent shall bite him,” is one of Solomon’s sayings, and it is most certainly true. How many there are in this world who have upon them a load of sorrow which is plainly and evidently the result of their own folly and iniquity! Their sin procured it for them.

There is also a godly sorrow which comes after sin has been committed, and which is not merely occasioned by the sin, but by the love of God, and the action of the Spirit of God upon the heart. When God means to save a man, He usually begins by making him sorrow on account of his evil ways. It is the sharp steel needle of the law of God that goes through the convicted heart, and draws the silken thread of comfort and salvation after it! It is not God’s way to make men alive, again, until they are really dead. I mean, that, *spiritually*, they must be first slain by the law, before they are made alive by the gospel. It is not God’s way to heal the unwounded heart, or to provide garments for those who are already clothed. Our heart must be broken, and we, ourselves, must be stripped before the healing balm can be applied—and the robe of righteousness can be put upon us.

I know that what I say upon this subject will be had in small esteem by those who have not learned the evil of sin. It is to such, only, as have felt the arrows of the Lord’s righteous anger rankling in their spirit that the gospel message will come with any kind of sweetness. If any here are suffering greatly under the burden of sin—as once I was myself—if any here are crushed to the earth as once I was crushed, they will be glad to hear God’s invitation of mercy, and to know the way by which it may be accepted!

The other day I read in the newspaper a story, which certainly surprised me, and undoubtedly, it is an instance of wonderful patience and forbearance on the part of a loving woman. I do not think that I have heard or read the likes of it in all my days. And I should think that such action as hers never was excelled. The wretch of whom I speak must have been the meanest man who ever lived—and died without being hanged! And the woman must have been one of the most wonderful of women ever seen upon the face of the earth! According to the account I read, the man had not been long married, but he did not prosper in his profession, and feeling that he had talent and ability, he came to London with his wife’s permission and consent, that he might make his way in the world. He did make his way and became, afterwards, a portrait painter of considerable eminence, so that he obtained admission into fashionable society, and lived upon the fat of the land. He had told his wife, when he wrote to her once, that if she came, she might be a burden to him, so he never fetched her up to London. Indeed, he never but on that one occasion communicated with her, and never sent her even a solitary sixpence! That state of things lasted for 40 years, and the wife remained true and faithful to him notwithstanding all the heartbreak caused by his cruel conduct. In the process of time, he spent all his money, and reduced himself to beggary—beside that, he was full of disease, yet he was mean enough to crawl to the door of the woman he had neglected all those years, and strange as it may seem, she opened it with delight, and welcomed him back to her heart. She put him in her bedroom, she carefully nursed and cared for him, and she wore her own life away by sitting at his bedside till he died.

Was it not splendid on her part? What monument ought not to be raised to such a loving woman as that? But I merely tell you this story in order to say that this woman’s forgiveness of her unworthy hus-

band is but a faint picture of the great love of God towards ungodly men! He feeds them, and supplies their every need—they are always dependent upon Him—they could not live an instant without His permission, yet some whom I know have never communicated with their God for 40 years! Forty years, did I say? Fifty, 60, or perhaps even more years than that they have lived as if there were no God! And worse, still, they have, perhaps, only used His name for the purposes of blasphemy! They have made a mockery of holy things, they have provoked the Lord to jealousy, and yet even now, though they are decrepit and old, if they are not only sick but sorry, if they are broken down and despairing, if they will but come creeping to God's door, He will say, "Come in and welcome!" He never yet refused to receive a soul that came to Him by Jesus Christ, His Son. And Jesus Christ Himself has said, "Him that comes to Me I will in no wise cast out." Oh, how many old sinners have come to Christ even at 80 years of age, and He has never uttered a word about those 80 wicked years—but He has said to each one of them, "Come in. I died for you. Come in and welcome." There have been many, many sins of the most aggravated kind committed, yet those who committed them have been freely forgiven! What did the Lord Jesus say to Saul of Tarsus? "I am Jesus whom you persecute: it is hard for you to kick against the pricks." Yet, having asked, "Why do you persecute Me?" He had nothing more to say to him by way of reproof or rebuke, but He blotted out his sin, and more than that, He counted him worthy—putting him into the ministry—so that this very man could afterwards say, "To me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."

I earnestly trust that God's infinite mercy and patience may be verified in the case of some whom I am now addressing, who have not yet turned to God. Pray, dear Christian friends, that it may be so! In handling this subject, I shall notice two things in my text. The first is, *the call from God*—"Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings." The second is *the method of obeying the call*. This is set forth in the words, "Behold, we come to You; for You are the LORD our God. 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."

I. To begin, then, here is THE CALL FROM God—"Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings."

You observe that it is a call to come back to God—and that means, first, *remember Him*—begin to *think* of Him, let Him be a living God to you. Come back to Him in your thoughts. The Lord Jehovah is the greatest factor in the universe! He works all things. He is the great Unit without which all the rest of the figures would be but ciphers. He made you—you are dependent upon Him from day to day. Before long your spirit must return to God who gave it—and you will have to stand before His judgement seat. Why, of all the persons in the world, must God be forgotten? Why, of all the things that are, should you forget this chief of all things, the great I AM? Do you say that there is no God? Ah, then I have nothing to do with you—your conduct in forgetting Him may be quite consistent with that declaration, though I am sure that you know better. But if there is a God, and you believe that He is, begin to think of Him in due proportion. I mean that as He is the greatest of all beings, give to Him your greatest and highest thoughts. And as He is most to be revered, give Him your most reverent and careful consideration.

I think that I am not asking too much of you. Certainly, if you are sorry for your sin, and wish the Lord to forgive you, the very first thing for you to do is to obey that ancient command, "Acquaint, now, yourself with Him, and be at peace: thereby good shall come to you." I know that the thought of your sin sometimes troubles you—so it ought, and it will do you good to be troubled if it leads you back to the Lord against whom you have sinned! If you have offended anyone, go and confess your offense, and make matters right. Perhaps you say that you do not like the person, and you are not willing to go to the person. Of course you are not! But that only proves how very right it would be for you to do so! That dislike of yours has sprung out of two things—first, your having been the offender, and secondly, your not being acquainted with the offended one. Now, if those two things are acknowledged, confessed, and remedied, you will soon find it to be the most joyful thing in all the world to think of God! It will be your delight above all things to rejoice in Him, and in all that He does. Begin, then, to think of God, for this is what He means when He says to you, "Return, you backsliding children."

The next thing is, really *turn to Him*. I know that you must have been shocked with the figure used in this chapter. [See exposition at the end of this sermon—EOD] That sense of shame I cannot help. As God used this symbol, it is good enough for me, and I am sure that there is an instructive meaning in it. I must turn again to that figure. We will suppose—(and, alas, bad as the case is, we need not go very far to find the likes of it)—that a woman has grievously offended against the honor of her husband. She has gone away and left him, and plunged into all sorts of sin and vice. Well no, suppose that there should come to her the message, "Return. He knows it all. He realizes all that it means. He has grieved over it

all, yet he says to you, Return.” She says, “I have spent all. I am in rags. I have but a miserable lodging. Those who once flattered me, and lived with me in sin, have forsaken me. I am a poor cast-off wretch, whom even a reformatory refuses.” Then the husband writes to her, and says, “Return. Return to me, and all shall be forgiven you, whatever it may be.” Do you not fancy that you can see her starting to go back to him? If there is anything left in her that is worth saving, she makes haste to accept the invitation. Yet she is very timid, and very much afraid. Oh, how her sad face is covered with the blushes of shame! How the tears fall down her furrowed cheeks! Sometimes she can hardly believe that such wonderful love can be exhibited to so undeserving a woman as she is. Perhaps she is troubled, and rightly troubled, by the thought that no man would do such a thing as her husband appeared to have done—and that it would not be right that he should do so. She therefore stops a while, and considers the matter. Yet it is all true. Her husband is one in a million; perhaps there is no other quite as loving and forgiving as he is. “Come back,” he says, “only confess your transgression, and comes back to me just as you are.” I think she must be a wretch, indeed, if she does not feel that she will lay all the rest of her life out in service and love to such a forgiving husband as she has!

Now, this is just how the Lord offers to deal with you. He says, “Come back. I will say nothing about the past. ‘I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, your transgressions, and as a cloud, your sins: return to Me; for I have redeemed you.’ I have forgiven your iniquities. I laid them all on My dear Son. He died for you, His precious blood has washed all your guilt away. Come back to Me. Come back to Me. ‘I have loved you with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn you.’ Come back to Me. ‘The Lord, the God of Israel, says that He hates putting away.’ I have not put you away, notwithstanding all your sin, and all your iniquity. Here is the message of My love and mercy, ‘Return, you backsliding children,’ for I am married to you, says the Lord your God.”

Well now, in some such way as that striking figure would import, come back to your God at once, poor wandering sinner, confessing all your wrong, wondering that there should be mercy for you, trusting that what the Lord says is, indeed, true because He says it—and resolve henceforth to live and to die at His dear feet—His servant as well as His beloved! This is the way to come back to God, so I would entreat you thus to return to Him!

There is one word in this call from God which proves that *you are invited to come back just as you are*. He says, “Return, you backsliding children.” I notice that He does not say, “Return, you penitent children.” He pictures you in your worst colors, yet He says, “Return, you backsliding children.” I also notice that He does not say, “Heal your wounds, first, and then come back to Me.” He says, “Return, you backsliding children,” with all your backslidings *unhealed*—“and I will heal your backslidings.” Many sinners seem to suppose that they must make themselves better, and *then* come to Christ—a most unworthy supposition, and an utterly unfounded one! Come just as you are, with no goodness, or virtue, or hope of any sort—come to Christ for it all! “But all who would be saved must believe in Jesus, and repent of their sins,” says one. Exactly so, but Christ does *not* want *you* to *begin* the work of salvation, and then let Him finish it! He never came to be a make-weight to add the last half-ounce to all that you had gathered. Come to Him with nothing, and He will fill the scale! Come empty, ragged, filthy, just as you are, and believe in God that justifies the ungodly. Cast yourself on Him who came to call not the righteous, but sinners to repentance! Bow in humility and patience before Him who flashes the lightning of Sinai in the face of every self-righteous sinner, but who kindles the milder, genial rays of Calvary to guide every truly humble and repentant sinner into the port of peace and everlasting love!

Thus have I put before you the call from God—“Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings.”

II. Now, in the second place, I want to show you THE METHOD OF OBEYING THIS CALL. There are two things in the text that are especially noteworthy. First, he who would return to God, and find salvation, must distinctly *renounce all other trust except that which God Himself gives him*, and sets before him in the gospel. Listen—“Truly in vain is salvation hoped for from the hills and from the multitude of mountains.” Judea was a hilly country, and wherever there was the peak of a mountain, or the summit of a hill, there was an idol temple—and wherever there was a grove of oaks, there would be an idolatrous shrine. Whenever the people traveled through the valleys, they kept looking up to these shrines, so their trust was in the hills, and in the multitudes of mountains. They had gods everywhere, blocks of wood and stone! So the Lord said to them, “If I am to receive you back, you must renounce all this idolatry.” The spiritual meaning of this passage is this—if you are to be saved by the grace of God, you must solemnly, formally, and heartily renounce all confidence in any but the living God, and His Son, Jesus Christ!

First, there must be a distinct renunciation of all righteousness of your own. You are a very excellent person in your own estimation. You think yourself well up to the mark—what have you ever done that is wrong? Ah, friend, there is no salvation for you on *that* ground! Your righteousness must in your own esteem become as filthy rags! You must acknowledge yourself to be defiled and undone, or there is no hope for you! The man who clings to his own righteousness is like a man who grasps a millstone to prevent himself from sinking in the flood. Your righteousness will damn you if you trust in it, as surely as will your sins, for it is a false proud lie—there is no truth in it, and no dependence must be placed upon it. There is not a man living who, by nature, does good, and sins not—and the soul that sins must die. We have not, any of us, a righteousness that will stand the test of the all-searching eyes of God! And in our heart of hearts we know it is so. Therefore, away with that lie, once and for all!

When I came to Christ, this matter did not trouble me, for I had not any righteousness of my own to which I could trust. And there are many poor souls who are in much the same condition in which I was. They do not want to keep the counterfeit money which they once reckoned to be great riches—they are anxious to be rid of it! Yes, brothers and sisters, and even at this present moment I do not know of anything that I have ever been, or done, or thought, or said that I could patch up into a righteousness upon which I could place the slightest reliance! I have not anything to trust to except the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior! And, what is more, I never wish to have, and never shall have any other ground of confidence! And I am sure, beloved, that you must build on the same foundation, or else Christ will never save you. You must altogether renounce any trust in your own righteousness.

The next thing that you must renounce is your own strength. There is many a young man whom I have known who has been going into impurity and into drunkenness. And he has been warned by kind friends to see the wrong in his course of action, but he has said, “Yes, I see it, but I shall make everything right. I shall become a total abstainer. I shall forsake evil companions. I shall keep out of harm’s way. I shall be as right as a trivet, I know that I shall. I have great strength of mind, and I always could command myself.” Excuse me, dear friend, but I should like very politely, and very kindly to tell you that you are a fool. You have not any strength, and, what is more, if you have, you will certainly be lost, for I read concerning those who are saved, “When we were yet *without strength*, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.” So that those for whom He died had not any strength! Believe me, dear friend, you have not any strength. Oh, I have seen many a young man with splendid moral principles trusting in himself! But where has his moral principle been when a woman’s pretty lips, and smiling face have enticed him to wantonness, or when, in frivolous company, he has been chaffed into that other glass of wine that has upset his balance of mind, and has led him to say things which he never thought could have come out of his mouth? Poor Hazeel was told by the prophet Elisha of the enormities he would commit, and he said, “Is your servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?” No, he was not a dog, but he was much worse than a dog, for he was a *devil*—yet he did not know it! And there is many a man who is fair to look upon, who is like John Bunyan’s tree which was green on the outside, but inwardly it was as rotten as to be only fit to be tinder for the devil’s tinderbox! You must give up your own strength—there is not much of it to give up, but whatever there is, give it all up, renounce all trust in your own strength as well as in your own righteousness!

With that must also go all trust in your own knowledge and abilities, and even in your own understanding. Yet this is the bane and ruin of many men! They know so much that, like Solomon’s sluggard, they are wiser in their own conceit than seven men who can render a reason. See how they treat the Bible, itself—when they open it, it is not that they may hear what God says in it—but that they may tell God what He ought to have said! When they condescend to listen to the gospel, it is not that they may hear what the gospel is, but that they may note how the man preaches it. Is he an eloquent orator? Does he use fine words? That is all that many care to hear. Sirs, if I could use grand words, I would loathe to use them lest I should ruin your souls! As the apostle Paul said, so say I, “Not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.” If I could get you to heaven by using the plainest words that can be uttered, I would sooner do it than I would leave any to perish in their sins because I was anxious to display the niceties of language, and the beauties of style! There are some men who are so wonderfully wise that they would quarrel with the angel Gabriel, or with the archangel Michael, himself. Solomon—well, Solomon did not know everything, but these men do. According to their own ideas, they not only know everything, but they know a little more besides! If ever we need anybody to rule the nation, I would undertake to find 50 prime ministers, so wise in their own esteem are many men, who are, I must add, so little, and so foolish when they come to be weighed in the balance of the sanctuary, and the unerring scales that God holds in His hand! Hear this, you great ones of the earth, “Except

you are converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.” He must become as a little child who would become a child of God. To be saved, we must not only—

*“Cast our deadly ‘doing’ down,
Down at Jesus’ feet,”*

but we must also—

*“Lay our boasted reason down,
Down at Jesus’ feet,”*

and ask that He may be made of God unto us “wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.”

Now, friends, what do you say to this? Are you willing to give up your own mind to God, and simply to believe what He tells you in His Word? Are you also willing to give up self-rule? “We are our own,” says one. “We may do as we like. Our tongues are our own, we may say what we like. We are free thinkers and free livers.” Let me tell you that if you are saved by Christ, you shall find the only true freedom you can ever enjoy! But there must first be a complete surrender of yourself to your God. Come now, who is to rule? Shall it be His will, or your will? Shall it be His way, or your way? If it is to be your way, it will be your ruin! But if it is to be God’s way, it shall be your salvation! When the Romans attacked a city, and the people yielded to them, they usually drew up a declaration which ran something like this—“We, craving mercy at the hands of the powers of Rome, surrender ourselves, our houses, our goods, our bodies, our souls, all that we have, and all that we are, to be dealt with by the Roman power exactly according to its will.” It was so worded that there could be no escape from it, and it contained no stipulations and no conditions. And then, as soon as it was signed, the Roman conqueror, in the generosity of his power, said, “You have yielded to me, now you are free.” God demands just that kind of submission! If you are to be forgiven, you must yield yourself up body, soul, spirit, purse, heart, and brain, *everything* to belong wholly to Christ henceforth and forever! I wish that yielding were over with all of you. If you would be saved, that submission must be yours. Oh, then, let it be so at once! Will you keep your sins, and go to hell, or leave your sins, and go to heaven? Will you have sin or the Savior? Which shall it be? Oh, that the blessed Spirit may lead you to the right decision, and lead you to that decision at once!

Finally, it is clear from the text that there must also be a *hearty, true-minded acceptance of God, alone, as our one hope*. Read the passage again. “Behold, we come to You; for you are the LORD our God...Truly in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel.”

There is but one living and true God! Men have made almost as many gods as there is sand on the seashore. There is, however, but one God—whose name is Jehovah—the Creator of all things, in whom we live, move and have our being. Will you have this God to be your God? Will you say, “This God is our God forever and ever—He will be our guide even unto death”? Will you take Him to be yours, not regarding Him merely as another man’s God, but henceforth as *your* God, whom you love, whom you embrace, not comprehending Him by thought, but apprehending Him by love?

Will you take God to be your God, and shall He be truly yours? Notice how the text says, “*Truly in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel.*” There must be no playing at this acceptance of God as our one hope. There must be no mocking of God by a pretended yielding up of ourselves to Him. It must be a true acceptance of God, to be our God henceforth and forever!

God only must be accepted as yours. There cannot be two Gods, nor two Christs. No man can serve two masters, nor can a woman love two bridegrooms. If you would be saved, you must, by a deliberate act, give up yourself, your whole self, to Christ, and take His whole salvation to be yours!

To help you to do this, let me remind you that there is a blessed Trinity in Unity. There is, first, the ever-blessed Father. What say you? Will you have this Father to be your Father? You have sinned against Him, will you crave His forgiveness for Christ’s sake? Will you ask to be admitted into His house by the blood-stained door of His Son’s atoning sacrifice? Will you honor Him as your Father? Will not each of you young people from this time cry unto Him, “My Father, You are the Guide of my youth”?

The next blessed and adorable Person of the United Trinity is the Son of God. Will you have this Son of God as your Savior? He died that sinners might live—will you have His death to be your life? He poured out His blood to cleanse the guilty from every stain of sin—will you be washed in the crimson stream? Shall Christ be Prophet to you? Will you sit at His feet and learn of Him? Shall Christ be Priest for you? Will you trust Him to present His sacrifice for you, and to intercede for you? Christ is a King—will you have Him as King to reign over you? In reality, will you have Him in all His offices, and in all His relationships, in the majesty of His glorious Godhead, and in the humiliation of His perfect manhood? Will you have this Man as yours? I put the question to you as one of old put it to the damsel he

met at the well, “Will you go with this man?” Will you have Christ to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, so that death, itself, shall not part you from Him? If so, have Him and welcome, for He is prepared to give Himself to every soul that is willing to accept Him!

There is a third Person of this blessed Unity, and that is the Holy Spirit. Are you willing to let the Holy Spirit come and dwell in you? It is He who must regenerate you if you are to be born-again. It is He who must teach you. It is He who must sanctify you. It is He who must illuminate you. It is He who must comfort and guide you. Without Him you can do nothing. The Holy Spirit is the very life of the Christian. What the Father decreed, what the Son purchased, that the Holy Spirit applies—and without that Holy Spirit, there is nothing for you. Will you obey His monitions? Will you put yourself under His superintendence? Will you resign your body to be His temple?

If you will do all this, God helping you, then believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved! His own word is, “He that believes, and is baptized shall be saved.” With the heart, believe on Him, then let the body be washed with pure water in baptism. Those two things the Lord Jesus Christ asks of you. Again I remind you that it is He who says, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved.” Demur not to either of these gospel words. Come at once, and do what He bids you, and enter into life, for he that believes in Him has everlasting life! And then, at once, make the Scriptural confession of your faith, as they did who heard the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost—“Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.”

Now look, sirs, I have done, for I do not know what more I can say to you than I have said. If I did know what more I could say, I am sure that I would say it, but I will tell you how this matter strikes me. If I had come into this Tabernacle, tonight, conscious of guilt, and desirous to be saved, I feel that, after hearing what has been said, tonight, I could not go out of this place without willfully refusing the gospel invitation, if I did refuse it. May you not refuse it, but accept it, for Christ’s sake! Amen.

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON: JEREMIAH 3:1-23.

In this chapter, the sin of God’s people is put in the strongest possible light. The figure used may even be said to be a coarse one, but man’s sin is, itself, a coarse thing. The thoughts suggested in this chapter are not what the delicate might desire, but then there is no delicacy in sin.

1. *They say, If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him, and becomes another man’s, may he return to her again? Would not that land be greatly polluted?*

God Himself seems, here, to be at a nonplus. His people had gone away from Him, they had acted unfaithfully to Him, and they had joined themselves unto other gods. The case was a very difficult one. If the Lord takes these people back, will it not look like putting a premium upon sin? That is just the question that is constantly being raised. If God freely forgives great sinners, will it not look as if He treated sin too leniently? Will not free salvation, by faith in Jesus lead to sin? The world says that it will, and even the Scripture seems to raise the question—“If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him, and becomes another man’s, may he return to her again? Would not that land be greatly polluted?” Yet Judah had been worse than the woman here described.

1. *But you have played the harlot with many lovers.*

Here was an awful depth of sin, a terrible enormity of wickedness!

1. *Yet return again to Me, says the LORD.*

What a splendor of divine love is here revealed! I do not wonder that the question should be put, “How can God act thus, and yet be just?” He can do it, and yet be just, as we have often showed you, but, still, it is a very great wonder of grace.

2, 3. *Lift up your eyes unto the high places, and see where you have not lain with men. By the road you have sat for them, as the Arabian in the wilderness and you have polluted the land with your whoredoms, and with your wickedness. Therefore the showers have been withheld, and there has been no latter rain; and you have had a whore’s forehead, you refused to be ashamed.*

This was very strong, rough language, but oh, how true it was! The people had gone astray from God into all manner of filthiness and pollution. And even when God had chastened them by withholding the showers till they were threatened with famine, they did not turn to Him. They seemed to have a brow like granite, they could not be made ashamed. There may be some persons of that kind in this assembly—if so, let them notice what God says—

4. *Will you not from this time cry unto Me, My Father, You are the guide of my youth?*

Will not you come back again? You are invited to return to the Lord, in spite of your wandering, your perverseness, and your abominable iniquity! Will you not remember the better days when God was the Guide of your youth? You were not always what you are now. Will you not, from this time on, cry unto the Lord, “My Father, you are the Guide of my youth”?

5. *Will He remain angry forever? Will He keep it to the end?*

No, that He will not! There is none as slow to anger as our God, and there is none so ready to be rid of it as He is. He is a God ready to pardon, waiting to forgive, delighting in mercy. Even though the sin should be as foul as that I read to you—I seem almost to blush in the reading, as you may in the hearing—yet, black as it is, God can put it all away in the greatness of His mercy.

5. *Behold, you have spoken and done evil things as you could.*

You have gone as far in sin as you could go! Only lack of power has prevented you from being even worse than you are. Yet this is the kind of people to whom God speaks in mercy, inviting them to return to Him.

6. *The LORD said also unto me in the day of Josiah the king, Have you seen that which backsliding Israel has done? She is gone up upon every high mountain and under every green tree, and there has played the harlot.*

Building temples to false gods on every mountain, and in every grove.

7. *And I said after she had done all these things, Turn you unto Me. But she returned not. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it.*

That made Judah’s sin even worse than that of Israel! She saw this great iniquity in another, and yet went and committed it herself.

8, 9. *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. And it came to pass through the lightness of her whoredom, that she defiled the land, and committed adultery with stones and with trees.*

Bowing down before idols made of wood and stone!

10-12. *And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned unto Me with her whole heart, but feignedly, says the LORD. And the LORD said unto me, The backsliding Israel has justified herself more than treacherous Judah. Go and proclaim these words toward the north—*

What must these words be? Must they not be, “You have treated Me so ill that I will never have anything to do with you again! Even common decency requires that I should put you away from all hope forever”? No! Listen to these words and be astounded—

12. *And say, Return, you backsliding Israel, says the LORD, and I will not cause My anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, says the LORD, and I will not stay angry forever.*

Oh, the measureless mercy of these gracious sentences! Deep and black as the sin is, and fearful and terrible as is the description of it, how bright, how clear is the immeasurable love which promises to put that sin away, and forget and forgive it once and for all!

13. *Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the LORD your God, and have scattered your ways to the strangers under every green tree, and you have not obeyed My voice, says the Lord.*

Confess that sad fact. Acknowledge that you have thus sinned. Into the ear of God pour out the full confession of your criminality. He cannot ask for anything less than this—surely you cannot refuse to do it! If you have thus treated Him, come and confess it with your head on His bosom, for He is willing to receive you even if you are the biggest sinner out of hell.

14, 15. *Turn, O backsliding children, says the LORD; for I am married unto you: and I will take you, one from a city, and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion: and I will give you pastors according to My heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.*

When God once begins to pardon men, there is no end to it. He goes on to bless them with all that they need! He makes them to be like the sheep of His pasture who shall be richly and happily fed.

16. *And it shall come to pass, when you are multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the LORD, they shall say no more, The ark of the covenant of the LORD: neither shall it come to mind: neither shall they remember it; neither shall they visit it; neither shall that be done any more.*

You know that they had been accustomed to the old ceremonial religion which was full of outward rites and forms. God says that when He brings His erring people back to Himself, they shall have done with all that mere externalism. They shall come to worship God in spirit and in truth, and to commune with Him without the medium of the ark of the covenant or an earthly priest. They shall walk before

Him in the joy of their spirits—yet these, mark you—are some of the people who are described in this chapter as having defiled the house of God, and gone astray from Him to their utter disgrace!

17. *At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the LORD; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem.*

Even to that very city that had become like a harlot, and was full of abominations.

17, 18. *Neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart. In those days the house of Judah shall walk with the house of Israel,*

There is no more quarrelling when divine grace comes in! Israel and Judah in the old days fought against each other, but when they, alike, taste of pardoning grace, they shall love each other.

18-19. *And they shall come together out of the land of the north to the land that I have given for an inheritance unto your fathers. But I said, how shall I put you among the children—*

When God had said all this, He appears to have come to a pause, and even in His own heart the question seems to arise, How can He deal with these greatly sinful ones as His children? “I said, How shall I put you among the children”—

19. *And give you a pleasant land, a goodly heritage of the host of nations? And I said, You shall call Me, my Father; and shall not turn away from Me.*

God knew how to change the character, and to change the heart so that these filthy ones who went farthest astray, should come back to Him, and should become among the most holy, the most loyal, the most obedient of all His children! Oh, that His grace might work that miracle, again, in our midst! Remember what He did for Saul of Tarsus, that transcendent persecutor, how He made him to be the very bravest of His apostles? He can at this moment take those who form the chosen bodyguard of the devil, and so change them that they shall become the soldiers of the cross, nearest to Christ, the great Commander! The Lord, by His servant the prophet, goes over this sad story again—

20. *Surely as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, so have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel, says the LORD.*

But listen—

21. *A voice was heard upon the high places.*

The places where they had built the altars to the false gods—“A voice was heard upon the high places”—

21. *Weeping and supplications of the children of Israel: for they have perverted their way, and they have forgotten the LORD their God.*

How pleasant to the ears of God is the weeping of His backsliding people! The happy God does not wish men to be sorrowful, but He is glad that they should be sorrowful for sin. Now that they have begun to bemoan their wanderings and their wickedness, they will come back to their God, so He says to them—

22, 23. *Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come to You; for You are the LORD our God. 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.*

So they come back to Him and find the salvation which they need.

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