

RETURN! RETURN!
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*“Return, you backsliding Israel. . . Turn, O backsliding children. . . Return, you backsliding children.”
Jeremiah 3:12, 14, 22.*

IT is, indeed, a horrible thing that a saved soul should ever wander from its Savior. After having had so much of past sin fully and freely forgiven, and after having been made to rejoice in perfect pardon, can it ever turn away from that dear pierced hand which lifted its heavy burden from its shoulders? Can it ever wander from the fountain in which it was washed whiter than snow? If so, it will indeed have committed a shameful sin. After so many spiritual benefits have been enjoyed, and the soul has not only been washed, but also robed, and fed, and adopted into the family of God, and been taught many wonderful lessons—can such a child as that leave such a home and such a Father, and go back to “the beggarly elements” from which it has been delivered? Ah, if it even thinks of doing so, it has, by that very thought, committed treason against the sovereign love of God. No, beloved, with so much sin forgiven, and so much favor bestowed, we ought to feel ourselves bound with cords to the horns of the altar; and with such bright prospects before us, such a heaven prepared by such a Savior—with the assurance that we shall forever be with Him where He is, beholding His glory—and with such exceedingly great and precious promises as He has made to him that overcomes, why, brethren, if we think of turning our backs in the day of battle, or of forsaking the King’s Highway for By-path meadow, the very thought must be most grievous to God as well as most shameful on our part. It ought to be intolerable to us to even think of such a thing; but for any believer in the Lord Jesus Christ actually to go astray—to sin against light and knowledge—to sin against infinite love and mercy—to sin against Your wounds, Emmanuel, and against Your crown of thorns—to offend against Your matchless love—oh, this is indeed dreadful! Well did the Lord say, concerning Israel’s backsliding, “Be astonished, O you heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid.”

Brethren and sisters in Christ, let me remind you that there is nothing for us to gain, and everything for us to lose, by forsaking the ways of God, even for a moment. We are not like those who have never known His ways, for we know them to be to paths of pleasantness and peace. We are not like those who are still deceived by the world, for we have proven how false she is. Her painted charms once bewitched our hearts, and we were enamored of her; but we have been undeceived, and now we cry, with Solomon, “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.” This empty world does but mock and deceive all who seek for true treasure in it; so are we going back to it after all that we have received from Christ, forsaking the real for the imaginary, the substantial for the shadowy? Can it be that we are going to commit these two evils—to forsake the fountain of living waters, and to hew out for ourselves broken cisterns which can hold no water? If any of us have done so in the past, let us be ashamed of ourselves; and if some of us have done so almost without knowing what we were doing, let us prostrate ourselves in the very dust before the Most High, for this is no common sin. It is a sin that has a high degree of heinousness and aggravation when any of us who have known the way of righteousness, and who have enjoyed sweet and hallowed fellowship with God, and the liberty with which Christ has made us free, go back to wear again the chains of sin’s slavery, and even for a while, or in part, again have a guilty complicity with that vain world which we professed to have forsaken once and for all.

Every man, however great his experience may be, is in danger. I have heard that more horses fall at the bottom of the hill than anywhere else, because the drivers fancy they have no need to hold them up when they have reached the bottom of the hill; and I have noticed that some of the saddest falls I have ever witnessed among Christian men have been among elderly Christians—among they who said of the young people, “Ah, they ought to be very watchful, for they have strong passions, and they may very easily be led astray; but as for us, we have had such a long experience that we have passed out of the range of temptation.” The most dangerous place in the world is that which is supposed to be beyond the reach of temptation. The power of the devil is often most to be feared when he has left you alone for a while,

for he has then probably left you to something or someone who will be more dangerous to you than he himself would be. That is to say, when a man says, “I shall never be tempted again,” he has already fallen into one of the devil’s most dangerous snares, for the pride of his heart has deceived him, and made him an easy prey to the great adversary. Satan delights to pluck grey beards, and to prove their owners to be fools. He has great joy in tripping up young men, in the fullness of their strength, to show that he is more than a match for the very strongest of them; he is even more glad to waylay a man in middle life, and to teach him that, even when he thinks he has all his wits about him, he is not so shrewd as the old tempter is; but I think it is his chief delight to waylay those who imagine that their long experience will preserve them from the snares of Satan. Therefore I say that we are all of us—from the little child to the man who is on the very brink of heaven—from the most timid up to the bravest of us all—in danger from our great adversary. Remember the dreadful conflict with Satan which John Knox had just as he was about to enter heaven, and remember Martin Luther’s desperate fight with the arch-fiend even in the midst of the waters of Jordan, and learn from the experience of these mighty men of God that we are all, always, from the first to the last, in danger; and, therefore, all of us have need to cry unto the Lord unceasingly—

*“Keep us, Lord, oh keep us ever,
Vain our hope if left by Thee;
We are Yours; oh leave us never,
Till Your face in heaven we see;
There to praise Thee
Through a bright eternity.
All our strength at once would fail us,
If deserted, Lord, by Thee;
Nothing then could aught avail us,
Certain our defeat would be:
Those who hate us
Thenceforth their desire would see.”*

Now, supposing that I am addressing any persons who have, unhappily, fallen into this sin, what is the message that I am to give to them from my Lord? After this morning’s service, I was talking with a brother in Christ who was in this sad condition. If he is here now, I would very affectionately commend to him the message which the Holy Spirit sends to him, and to all who are like him—the word which comes over and over again in the three texts upon which I am about to speak to you—“Return! Return!”

I. In trying to press that one simple message home to the backsliding heart, I shall, first of all, speak of **THE SURPRISE WHICH THIS MESSAGE OUGHT TO AWAKEN:** “Return!”

Does God really mean that? After I have wandered so far from Him, does He invite me to come back to Him? Yes, beloved, He does; and He does so fully realizing all that the word “Return” involves. There is a holy jealousy in the heart of God, which causes Him to feel a righteous anger when any of His children wander away from Him; yet this word “Return” proves that He has put aside that jealousy in a marvelously gracious manner. Let me read to you what the Lord says, in the first verse of the chapter from which my texts are taken, for I want to keep you to God’s own Word, which will do you far more good, and give you far more solid comfort, than any word of mine. “They say,”—that is, everybody says it—“If a man puts away his wife, and she goes from him, and becomes another man’s, shall he return unto her again? Shall not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to Me, says the Lord.” I cannot say much about the illustration which the Lord here uses; it is a thing to be thought of rather than to be talked about; but do you not see that the delicacy, which makes a man feel that he cannot take back his erring spouse, is far more developed in the mind of God; yet, over the head of that delicacy, there rides this omnipotent love, which makes Him say, even to you who have wandered the furthest from Him, “Return unto Me notwithstanding all that has happened.” Are you not surprised at the Lord’s message when it is set before you in such a light as this? Yet, surprising as it is, I pray you to believe it, and promptly to obey it.

The wonder is increased when we remember that the sin of going away from God has, in some cases, been *so grossly committed as to involve a terrible mass of guilt*. If you read the whole of this chapter—which is more suitable for your own private reading than for the general congregation—you will see that Israel had wandered from the Lord in the most shameless manner, and yet He said to her, “Return, you backsliding Israel.” Now, if you are indeed a child of God, although you may have become neglectful of the Sabbath—though it may have been a long time since you bowed your knee in prayer—though your

Bible has become covered with dust through your neglect—and though you have so acted that even mere worldlings might have been ashamed to act as you have done; yet, still, almighty mercy, with the tear of pity standing in its eye, says to you, “Return, return, return.” It condemns your sin, and you also must condemn it, for it is an exceedingly loathsome and horrible thing; but you, yourself, that same mercy gladly would save, and it says to you still, “Return, return, return.”

To add to the wonder that this message excites, remember *the obstinate adherence to evil which some of you have evinced even when you have been suffering for your wrongdoing*. Turn to the third verse: “Therefore the showers have been withheld, and there has been no latter rain; and you had a whore’s forehead, you refused to be ashamed.” God had kept back the rain, and thus had prevented the ripening and ingathering of the harvest. Famine and want had stalked through the land, and smitten multitudes of the guilty people with death. Those who were spared knew why this judgment had come; yet they did not return to the Lord. They had a forehead of brass, and they would not own their guilt, but obstinately clung to their sin. Brother, sister, have you had this painful experience? Have you been divinely afflicted again and again, and yet have you not repented, and turned to the Lord? And notwithstanding that the blows of His rod appear to have been lost upon you, and though He has scourged you again and again, apparently to no purpose, still does His blessed Spirit yearn over you, and the message He sends to you is not one of condemnation or threatening, but simply this, “Return, return, return.” Oh, this is indeed amazing love, that puts up with your ill manners, and will not take “no” for an answer from you, but still sweetly invites you to return to the Lord from whom you have wandered so far, and against whom you have sinned so grossly!

Notice, also, that *these sinful people had refused repeated invitations to return to the Lord*. How tenderly He says, in the fourth verse, “Will you not from this time cry unto Me, My father, You are the guide of my youth?” As if the Lord meant to say to the sinning one, “Have you not had sufficient suffering as the result of your sin? The showers have been withheld, poverty has come upon you, your barns are empty, and there is no corn in the fields to fill them; will you not, at least from this time, begin to call Me, ‘Father,’ and ask Me to be your Friend?” Yet the guilty nation put all this pleading aside; but, even then, the Lord still cried, “Return, return, return;” and if, dear friends, you have heard a great many earnest, faithful sermons, and had many loving entreaties from Christian men and women, and yet have put them all aside, it is unutterably grievous that it should have been so, yet still there is only this message for you, even now, “Return, return, return.”

Worse still, *these people had even turned the grace of God into licentiousness, and had made mischief out of God’s goodness*. Read in the fifth verse, what they said: “Will He reserve His anger forever? Will He keep it to the end? Behold, you have spoken and done evil things as you could.” Because God is so merciful, they were the more sinful; and because He does not keep His anger forever, therefore they dared to provoke it again and again. This is one of the worst ways in which sinners prove how exceedingly sinful they are. A man is very far gone in guilt when he reads grace the wrong way upwards, and infers, from the long-suffering of the Lord, that he may continue in sin. Still, if you have done this, my brother or my sister, the Lord’s message to you is, “Return, return, return.” Give me your hand, and come you back, with melting heart and streaming eyes, and seek your Heavenly Father’s face again, for the great bell still rings out from the hospice of mercy, and its message to you is this, “Though you have lost your way in the blinding snows of despondency and doubt, mercy is still proclaimed to you; therefore, Return, return, return.” Can you not hear that great bell swinging in the tower of God’s love and compassion? Turn your head that way, and ask the Lord to lead you where that bell’s message summons you: “Return, return, return.”

II. Now, in the second place, we will change the run of our thought a little by noting that THIS VOICE MUST AWAKEN MANY MEMORIES IN THE BACKSLIDER’S MIND.

He has long been going away from God; but even while he has been sitting in this place, he has been obliged to think of former and happier times in his history; and, now, that word “Return” causes him to recollect *the time when he first came to the Lord*. Ah, my brothers, with what a broken heart, and with what terrors and alarms, and with what weeping eyes you loved up to Jesus on the accursed tree! And, as you looked to Him, you found, as you thought, and as I hope you really did, peace, and pardon, and everlasting life. Where have you been, my brother, since that memorable day? Where have you been? Wandering from that dear cross, always going further and further away from that divine love incarnate which hung bleeding there for you. Peter, your Lord’s loving, pitying eye is still fixed upon you, though

you have denied Him, and have falsely said, “I know not the man.” Still do the glances of His eye say, “Peter, return to Me. Return, My poor, foolish, sinful disciple. You have sadly fallen by your iniquity; but, although you have so greatly changed, I have not. My heart still yearns over you. Return unto Me, for I have redeemed you.”

That word “Return” must also awaken in your memories *recollections of the happy days you used to have when you were living near to God*. Some of you have had times of great joy and gladness in this very Tabernacle; you used to sing as sweetly and as joyfully as any, especially when we sang the song of songs—

“Worthy the Lamb, for He was slain.”

Ah! You loved Him then, did you not? You were not a hypocrite, were you? You did mean what you sang, and you did feel it, did you not? You have had, since then, often to question yourselves to know whether you really were sincere at that time, or not; yet I hope you can truthfully say, “Lord, You know all things, You know that I did love You then.” Why, the time was, when the very mention of that dear name used to fire your blood as the sound of martial music stirs the soldier’s spirit in the day of battle. You know how you would have gone over hedge and ditch to hear the gospel preached in those days, and you would cheerfully have put up with the discomfort of standing in the aisle of the overcrowded building; you were not so dainty and thin-skinned then as you are now. How you relished the gospel then! What sweetness, what marrow and fatness it was to your spirit at these communion times when you sat among the people of God, and remembered the dying love of Christ! Many and many a time you have joined with your fellow members in singing—

***“My willing soul would stay
In such a frame as this,
And sit and sing herself away
To everlasting bliss.”***

Yet now, alas! You have to sing, or to sigh—

***“What peaceful hours I then enjoyed,
How sweet their memory still!”***

Well, let the recollection of them come up in your mind, for it will do you good. While you hear your Lord saying to you, “Return, return,” it will help you to return if you recall what it is to which you have to return—those halcyon days, those happy Sabbaths when your heart seemed to have a whole peal of bells within it, and every one of them gave forth the richest melody to the praise and glory of Jesus Christ, your Lord and Savior.

Do you not also recollect *how you used to talk to others about the Savior*? Ah, my brethren, if I ever wander from my Lord, my sermons will be a sufficient rebuke to me even if no one says a word to reprove me for my backsliding. What are you doing, you who once preached so earnestly to others? What are you doing, you who used to conduct a Bible class, where you warned young people against going into the world, yet you have gone there yourself? You used to tell them that if all others in the world should be ashamed of Christ, you would never be ashamed of Him, yet you are. You used to pray very fervently at the prayer meeting; you visited the sick, and cheered them, and God made you useful to souls that are now in heaven; yet you have begun to doubt whether you will ever get there yourself. O soul, remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do your first works! If you are indeed a child of God, let the recollection of your own sermons, and addresses, and warnings, and prayers rise up before your spirit, to stir your conscience, and to make you feel ashamed of your backsliding.

The Lord’s call to you to return to Him will probably, also awaken other memories. It will help you to remember *how it was you first went astray*. You went on swimmingly at first, did you not? But where did you begin to go astray? Nine times out of ten, declension from God begins in the neglect of private prayer. Possibly, it was so in your case; and it may be that everything seemed to go about as well with you when you did not pray as when you did; indeed, everything went far too smoothly with you; it would have been much better for you if your way had been hedged up with thorns and briars. Then you know that you began to get lax in your mode of life; you would not admit that you were doing anything that was sinful, and you were very angry with those who told you that you were in danger. You said that you did not believe in such Puritanical preciseness as they advocated; you were a man who could think and decide for himself. And you did so, did you not, and have you not thought yourself and brought yourself into a sad plight? And you were going to sail a little closer to the wind than others could do, because you felt that you had

a stronger will than they had, and could turn your vessel whenever you pleased. There were certain amusements that might be harmful to young people, but not to you, for you felt that you had greater strength of mind than they had. That is how you began to wander from God. The declension came on by degrees. You did not jump down all at once, but you went down just as surely step by step. As to your first little slip, as you called it, you said there was nothing wrong in it; and nothing wrong in the second slip and not much wrong in the third slip by itself; but putting them all together, with all the subsequent slips, where have they landed you? Yet, notwithstanding all this, I want you to hear the Master still saying to you, "Return, return, return." Remember how far you have to go back, for you have to traverse again all that road along which you came with your face turned the wrong way.

III. Now we will pass on to notice, in the third place, THE REASONS WHICH ARE URGED IN THE CONTEXT WHY WE SHOULD RETURN.

Look at the twelfth verse. I think I will not explain these reasons, but just read them to you. "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 keep anger forever." Can you hear that verse without tears coming into your eyes? There is forgiveness, mercy, pardon, still in your Lord's heart; will not that blessed fact lead you to come back to Him?

Now read the fourteenth verse, for it contains a second reason why you should return to the Lord. "Turn, O backsliding children, says the Lord; for I am married to you." Can you believe that? If you can, you cannot continue to be a backslider. After all that you have done against Him, the Lord still owns the marriage bond that exists between your poor polluted souls and His own holy and gracious self, and He says to you, "Turn, O backsliding children, for I am married to you." Who can hold back when the Lord uses such an expression as that—"married unto you"—you black, foul wanderer—"I am married unto you"? In the East, a man could very easily divorce his wife; he just gave her a letter, and sent her away; but the Lord, the God of Israel, says that He hates putting away; that is to say, He hates divorce, and He never will have a divorce from the soul that has once been married to Him. Come back to Him, then. If He is so faithful despite your sin, let your heart yearn towards Him. Return to your first Husband, for it was better with you then than now.

Now read the twenty-second verse: "Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings." Is not that another blessed reason why you should return to the Lord? He promises that He will remove all the evil that sin has done to you; and that, into whatsoever sin you may have fallen through your wanderings He will rescue you from it. He will treat your backsliding as a disease, and heal it. I need scarcely stay to tell you what is the remedy that He will apply to you, for you all know that it is by the stripes of Jesus that we are healed. So, come again to that cross to which you came at first, and there you shall again find that His dear pierced hand shall be laid upon your wounds, taking the venom out of them, and so perfectly restoring you that your flesh shall come again unto you like the flesh of a little child; and then you will be able gratefully to sing, "He restores my soul: He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake;"—"Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless His holy name."

IV. I am speaking briefly upon each point, but I trust that each one of them will abide in your memories without a multitude of words to press the truth home to your hearts; and I want you, in the fourth place, to notice SOME GRACIOUS DIRECTIONS WHICH ARE GIVEN TO ASSIST YOU TO RETURN TO THE LORD.

Read the thirteenth verse if you wish to learn the way by which you are to return, and give heed to every syllable of it: "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." That is the first thing you have to do; *make a full confession of your wrongdoing*. Go at once to God, and make it; do not delay another minute. You have sinned against the Lord; go to Him, and own from your very heart that you have done so.

Then turn to the twentieth and twenty-first verses: "Surely as a wife treacherously departed from her husband, so have you dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel, says the Lord. A voice was heard upon the high places, weeping and supplications of the children of Israel: for they have perverted their way, and they have forgotten the Lord their God." So, let *the acknowledgment of your wrongdoing be attended with deep contrition of heart*. Be grieved that you have grieved your God; ask the Holy Spirit to

melt your spirit, so that you may mourn before the Most High, and lament that you have wandered so far from Him.

Once again, the way to come back to God is plainly set before you at the end of the twenty-second verse: "Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto You; for You are the Lord our God." *Take the Lord to be your God all over again*; Go back, and begin again where you began before with the Father, and with the Son, and with the Holy Spirit; may the Sacred Trinity graciously enable you to do so!

And, further, *come back to the Lord by confessing the result of your sin*, the mischief that it has brought upon you, even as these ancient backsliders did when they sorrowfully said, "For shame has devoured the labor of our fathers from our youth; their flocks and their herds, their sons and their daughters. We lie down in our shame, and our confusion covers us: for we have sinned against the Lord our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even unto this day, and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God." So, dear friends, you see that the way to get back to God is to confess the wrong that you have done by wandering away from Him, to lament that wrong and again to take the Lord to be your God by an act of simple faith, and to begin once more even as you began your spiritual life. It is possible that you are anxious to know whether you ever were a child of God or not. Well, that is a knot which you cannot untie, so you had better cut it. Do you ask, "How can I cut it?" You can do so in this way; say to yourself, "If I am not a saint, I am a sinner, and Christ Jesus come into the world to save sinners, so I will trust Him to save me." I have begun again, in this fashion, a great many times; often, when doubts and fears have arisen within my spirit, and my evidences have grown dim, I have found that the best thing I could do was to pray the publican's prayer, and cry, "God be merciful to me a sinner." I am only asking you, poor wandering soul, to do that which it is the delight of God's people to be doing every day. Come, repenting and humbled, and take the Lord Jesus Christ again to be your All in All, your living, loving Savior.

V. Now, lastly, I want to encourage you to return unto the Lord by very briefly mentioning **SOME OF THE MERCIES WHICH GOD PROMISES, IN ORDER TO KEEP YOU FROM ANY FUTURE WANDERING.**

Our blessed Master knows that *many of His children wander because they are not well fed*. There were many supposed converts, during the recent revival, of which we have not heard anything, simply because there was nobody to look after them; in many cases, when the evangelists, whom God so greatly blessed, had gone to other places, their converts were left to starve spiritually. Listen to the fifteenth verse of this chapter, those of you who have been thus starved, whose backsliding was, in the first instance, the result of your not hearing good gospel teaching: "I will give you pastors according to My heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding." Plead that promise with the God who gave it, and you will find that He will fulfill it in your experience.

The next thing that you need, in order to keep you from further wandering from God, is that *you should seek to become more spiritual in your worship*. Some poor souls, who are, we trust, truly converted, never seem to get beyond mere external, formal worship; they do not get into the heart of it. Let all such persons note what the Lord says in the sixteenth verse: "And it shall come to pass, when you be 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." That is to say, mere formal worship shall come to an end: "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: neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart." To be enabled to render true, spiritual worship unto the Lord, and to learn the inner meaning of His Word, will cause you to be established in the faith, so that you will not be likely to be carried about with every wind of doctrine, and be caused to backslide.

Bear with me just a minute while I give you another sweet promise which will help to keep you from again wandering from the Lord. *You shall have the Spirit of adoption in your heart*, as the Lord says, in the nineteenth verse: "But I said, How shall I put you among the children, and give you a pleasant land, a goodly heritage of the hosts of nations? And I said, You shall call Me, My Father; and shall not turn away from Me." O beloved, get a firm grip of that precious promise, for it assures you that final perseverance which is the heritage of the saints. "You shall call Me, My Father; and shall not turn away from Me." As the Lord promises that great blessing, there need be no fear of your backsliding to destruction, whatever your temptations may be in the days and years that are yet to come.

Last of all, if you wish to be kept from wandering away from the Lord, come back, to the simplicity of your first dependence upon him. Read the twenty-third verse, “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 that, what you need is to get back again to the place where you first began to worship God in spirit and in truth, to know yourself to be His child and to be clean cut off from every trust except in the Lord Himself. You must see that salvation is all of grace from first to last, that it is the work of the Holy Spirit, and that it is freely given to you, an undeserving, ill-deserving, hell-deserving sinner. When you get back to that blessed position, you will learn more of the love of God which will hold you with a grip that nothing can loose, and from which you shall never escape from this time forth and forever. Therefore, poor backslider, come here, and breathe the prayer to your Heavenly Father, not merely to receive you, but also to keep you, so that henceforth you shall never again go astray from Him who keeps the feet of His saints. “And now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.”

EXPOSITION BY C. H. SPURGEON: **JEREMIAH 2:20-37.**

Verses 20-26. *For of old I have broken your yoke, and burst your bands; and you said, I will not transgress; when upon every high hill and under every green tree you wandered, playing the harlot. Yet I had planted you a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then are you turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto Me? For though you wash yourself with niter, and take you much soap, yet your iniquity is marked before Me, says the Lord GOD. How can you say, I am not polluted, I have not gone after the Baalim? See your way in the valley, know what you have done: you are a swift dromedary breaking traversing her ways; a wild ass used to the wilderness that sniffs up the wind at her pleasure; in her occasion who can turn her away? All they that seek her will not weary themselves; in her month they shall find her. Withhold your foot from being unshod, and your throat from thirst: but you said, There is no hope: no; for I have loved strangers, and after them will I go. As the thief is ashamed when he is found,—*

And there are many people whose repentance is of no more value than the shame of a thief, when he is found out. Oh, for something better and deeper than this!

26, 27. *So is the house of Israel ashamed; they, their kings, their princes, and their priests, and their prophets, saying to a stock, You are my father; and to a stone, You have brought me forth: for they have turned their back unto Me, and not their face: but in the time of their trouble they will say, Arise, and save us.*

Some men never pray except in stormy weather. Their religion is wholly dependent upon their condition and circumstances. If all is going well with them, they bend not their knees before the Lord; but when they are in sore distress, and especially if they think they are likely soon to die, then they cry unto God, “Arise and save us;” with no more true faith than these idolaters had when they cried to their powerless idols.

28-30. *But where are your gods that you have made you? Let them arise, if they can save you in the time of your trouble: for according to the number of your cities are your gods, O Judah. Wherefore will you plead with Me? You all have transgressed against Me, says the LORD. In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction: your own sword has devoured your prophets, like a destroying lion.*

So far from accepting God’s rebukes in the right spirit, and forsaking their idol gods, they even turned upon the Lord’s messengers, and put His prophets to death.

31. *O generation, see you the word of the LORD.*

“If you will not hear it, see it.”

31. *Have I been a wilderness unto Israel? A land of darkness? Wherefore say My people, We are lords; we will come no more to You?*

“Do you not see,” says the Lord to these rebellious people, “how much I have done for you? Have you forgotten the numberless mercies I have lavished upon you? I have kept from you nothing that was really good for you. When you worshipped Me in sincerity and in truth, you prospered exceedingly; but when

you turned away from Me, you made a sad mistake. See, then, the sermons which providence itself preaches to you if you will not hear what My prophets say to you in My name.”

32. *Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? Yet My people have forgotten Me days without number.*

The very beauty of a believer—his glorious dress—is his God. Then can we ever forget Him; or all the precious things of the covenant of grace which He so freely bestows upon us? Can we—*can* we—have fallen as low as to forget the God to whom we owe so much? Alas, He can still say, “My people have forgotten Me days without number.”

33, 34. *Why trim you your way to seek love? Therefore you have also taught the wicked ones your ways. Also in your skirts is found the blood of the souls of the poor innocents: I have not found it by secret search, but upon all these.*

God’s ancient people had so completely turned away from Him, and wandered so far from Him, that they had practiced all manner of evil in order to prove their love for other gods. They even went among the heathen, and taught them to sin yet worse than they had sinned before. This was most shameful back-sliding, a horrible evil in the sight of God.

35. *Yet you say, Because I am innocent, surely His anger shall turn from me.*

The most guilty people are often the most self-righteous. The sinful nation, which ought to have pleaded guilty, here says, “Because I am innocent, surely His anger shall turn from me.”

36. *Behold, I will plead My case against you, because you say, I have not sinned.*

That is the great cause of quarrel between God and men. Many a man still says, “I have not sinned,” although God’s law condemns him and the very office of the Savior, proves that the guilty one needed to be saved by One who was almighty. Self-righteousness is a thing which God utterly abhors.

36. *Why gad you about so much to change your way? You also shall be ashamed of Egypt, as you are ashamed of Assyria.*

First they trusted to Assyria to save them; and when that broken reed failed them, then they trusted to Egypt; and in a similar fashion, we go from one false hope to another—from one carnal confidence to another, gadding about to change our way; yet, all the while, refusing to turn to the Lord.

37. *Yes, you shall go forth from him, with your hands upon your head:*

You shall go forth as a captive, with your hands bound above your head; or, like one in great pain or sorrow, you shall hold your hands to your head.

37. *For the LORD has rejected your confidences, and you shall not prosper in them.*

May God, in His mercy, save all of us from false confidences, both now and throughout our whole lives!

**HYMNS FROM “OUR OWN HYMN BOOK”—427, 522, 521;
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