

“Liar!”

The thought crossed my mind as I heard him ask his wife to forgive him.

The tears looked good.

The words sounded sincere.

But I didn't believe it.

He was still playing the game.

If he would “repent” then she would “return” and he'd be back in control.

What does true repentance look like?

How can we distinguish between true repentance and false repentance –
the “pretense” of verse 10?

In the moment when the words are spoken,
we don't really know.

All I had was a gut feeling – a pattern of words and behaviors over a period of years
that told me that this was not genuine.

The only way to distinguish between returning with a “whole heart” and returning “in pretense”
is by looking at the actions that come after the words.

True repentance bears two sorts of fruits:

the first is ethical – truth, justice, and righteousness (4:2);

the second is missional – when God's people repent, the nations glory in the Lord (4:2).

Our Shorter Catechism says it well:

“Repentance unto life is a saving grace whereby a sinner,
out of a true sense of his sin and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ,
does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it, unto God,
with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.”

The Catechism captures very well the central point of Jeremiah 3:

Repentance is a saving grace whereby a sinner turns from sin unto God.

Repentance is a *turning*.

The word translated “return” is simply the Hebrew word “shub – which means “to turn.”

It is sometimes translated “turn” – sometimes “return” – and sometimes “repent.”

A few weeks ago, we saw in the first Psalms of book 1 of the Psalter

that this is a common word to use of how *God* must *turn* his face toward us,
so that we can be saved.

And *when* God *turns* his face toward us,
then we can return to the LORD with a whole heart.

Introduction: “In the Days of King Josiah” (3:6a)

⁶ *The LORD said to me in the days of King Josiah:*

It's important to note the "time stamp" on this prophecy:
"in the days of King Josiah."

This means that this is early in Jeremiah's ministry.

King Josiah was the best king that Judah had.

David, Solomon, and Hezekiah were all good,

but 2 Kings 23:25 says that before Josiah there was no king in Jerusalem

"who turned to the LORD with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might."

Josiah was the most faithful king of Judah.

So Jeremiah 3:6-4:4 is the message that the LORD had for Judah
in the days when Judah had a great king.

Having a good king – a reforming king – is not enough!

1. "She Did Not Return": Judah Has Not Learned from the Adultery and Divorce of Her Sister, Israel (3:6b-10)

a. Adultery and the Divorce of Faithless Israel (v6b-8a)

"Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore?"⁷ And I thought, 'After she has done all this she will return to me,' but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it.⁸ She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce.

The LORD starts by reflecting on the story of Israel – the northern kingdom.

Israel had divided around the year 930 BC,

with Jeroboam leading a rebellion against Rehoboam, the son of Solomon.

For 200 years, the northern kingdom of Israel

was the larger, more powerful, and more prosperous of the two.

Even good kings of Judah, like Jehoshaphat,

acknowledged that they were the junior partner in terms of power and influence.

But quite frankly, to say that Israel was bigger than Judah

is like saying that Connecticut is bigger than Rhode Island!

Israel was bigger than Judah –

but compared to the nations around her, Israel felt very small – and very alone.

And so Israel pursued alliances with the nations in order to protect her.

And God calls this adultery – or more precisely, prostitution,

since Israel "played the whore" in order to gain material advantage.

In verses 6-8, God recounts the story of Israel.

He thought that after Israel had played the whore with the nations and their gods,
that she would return to him.

But she did not return.

Israel did not repent.
And so, 'for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel'
God sent her away with a decree of divorce.

God divorced Israel.
Some people don't like to say this.
Some people prefer to say that God temporarily separated from Israel,
but he didn't really divorce her.

God says that he sent her away with a decree of divorce.
This is the word used in Deuteronomy 24:1-3, when it says that a man
may send his wife away with a "bill of divorce."
It is only used four times in the OT – always with the same meaning.

God divorced Israel by means of the Assyrian army of Sennacherib,
which devastated the northern kingdom in the 720s
and captured Samaria in 722,
and took them away into exile.
And over the next 800 years the northern tribes of Israel
dwindled and mingled with the nations,
until a mixed race known as the Samaritans was all that remained.

And her treacherous sister, Judah, saw it.
Israel is faithless.
Judah is treacherous.
There is a wordplay here that is hard to capture in translation.
The theme of the passage is turning/returning – in the sense of repentance.
The word translated "faithless" is built off of that same word.

So, perhaps "turncoat" would capture the wordplay.

Turncoat Israel is famous for her turning!
She turns this way and that way;
she turns back and forth –
but she never turns to me!

And her treacherous sister, Judah, saw it.

[A brief note on gender: for most of the prophets, Israel and Judah are masculine;
Samaria and Jerusalem – the capital cities – are feminine.
Jeremiah consistently speaks of Israel and Judah in the feminine.
Grammatically this is inappropriate in Hebrew.
Nations are masculine.
Cities are feminine.
Jeremiah intentionally and obviously uses feminine pronouns
for the masculine names, Israel and Judah.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul says that the head of a wife is her husband, the head of a man is Christ, and the head of Christ is God – thus establishing a parallel between a husband-wife relation (man and woman), and a Father-Son relation (God and Christ).

The relationship of the Father and the Son is the paradigm for all human relationships. When God called Israel to be his *son* (Exodus 4) he also entered into a marriage relation with Israel. The theme of sonship highlights the ideas of image and likeness, as well as the idea of inheritance. The theme of marriage highlights the ideas of fidelity and love, as well as the idea of procreation.

Jeremiah made this connection long before Paul – just glance ahead to verse 22 –
“Return, O faithless sons; I will heal your faithlessness.”
Are we talking about wives or sons?

Exactly!
Men are part of the bride.
Women are part of the son.]

b. The Fake Repentance of Treacherous Judah (v8b-10)

Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore.⁹ Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree.¹⁰ Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the LORD.”

We saw last time that Judah exchanged the glory of God for images – and the truth of God for a lie –
“who say to a tree, ‘You are my father,’ and to a stone, ‘You gave me birth.’” (2:27)

“Committing adultery with stone and tree”
clearly identifies this as idolatry.

In verse 6 it was “under” every green tree.
Now it is “with” stone and tree.
Creation itself is polluted by our idolatry.
When you worship the creature instead of the Creator,
you are defiling the creature as well as rebelling against the Creator.

Judah saw what Israel did.
Judah saw the results.
By the time Jeremiah is prophesying, it has been 100 years since Israel was divorced.
Israel has been in exile in Assyria for over a century.

The fall of Samaria was as long ago as World War I is to us.
Remember the Ottoman Empire?
What lessons have we learned from the fall of the Ottoman Empire?
(Not much, from what I can see in the Middle East today!!)

What effect did the fall of Samaria have on Jerusalem?
How did Judah respond to the exile of Israel?

She “did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense.”

What is “fake repentance”?

It’s the “sorry” given by the child who is required to “apologize to your sister!”
It’s when you know that you need to say the words,
but you fully intend to go back to your sin.
Or, perhaps a better way of saying it
is that you kind of wish that you really meant it –
but in fact, you know that it’s not going to work!

We saw this as one of the lies that Judah believed last time in chapter 2, verse 25:
“It is hopeless, for I have loved foreigners, and after them I will go.”

Israel rebelled and stayed in rebellion –
turning this way and that – but *never* turning back to the LORD.
Judah rebelled and then repented –
and then rebelled and then repented –
but Judah did not return *with her whole heart*.

Remember when Jeremiah is saying this:
“in the days of King Josiah” –
in the days of the most faithful king Judah ever had!
In the days of the great Reformer who restored the worship of God!
In other words, even when you have the best king, the best worship –
“your best life now!” –
Judah is still half-hearted in their repentance.

Jeremiah is identifying the fundamental problem with humanity –
exemplified most clearly in the case study of Judah:
even at our best, we are half-hearted in our repentance.
We’re just faking it.

Why do I know what fake repentance looks like?
Because I do it all the time!
I return to the Lord with part of my heart –
and part of my heart says, “I don’t know how to stop...”

Our problem is that we do not return to the Lord with a whole heart.

2. “Return, Faithless Israel”: the Call to True Repentance (3:11-13)

And so, in verse 11, God says the most shocking thing imaginable:

¹¹ *And the LORD said to me, “Faithless Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.*

I appreciate the ESV being honest with the verb here.
Some have gone the route of saying “less guilty” –
but that is not God’s point.
This is the verb that can be translated “to justify.”
Faithless Israel – ever-turning Israel – has justified her soul
more than treacherous Judah.

But it is important to see the comparative here:

Israel is *more* righteous than Judah.
Israel is faithless, Judah is treacherous –
“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God!”

The prophet Ezekiel was a child in Jerusalem at this time.
He may well have heard Jeremiah preach.
He certainly knew the older prophet’s message well!
Ezekiel will take the themes of Jeremiah 2-3
and ratchet up the rhetoric in Ezekiel 16,
to the point that Jerusalem’s sin
makes even Sodom and Gomorrah look righteous –
a point that our Lord Jesus Christ will play off
when he says that Sodom and Gomorrah would have repented
if he had performed his mighty deeds before them! (Matt 11:20-24)

But Ezekiel only began to prophesy in Babylon – after he was taken away
with the first round of exiles in 597 BC.

Jeremiah is preaching 25 years earlier –
at the height of the reforms of the good king Josiah!

And Jeremiah is saying that Josiah’s reforms are a sham.
Judah’s repentance is a fraud.

I want you to think about this carefully.

The books of Kings and Chronicles portray Josiah’s reforms as being entirely sincere!
But the book of Kings – in particular – makes it clear that Josiah’s repentance
was way too late!

And if you reflect on the fact that *every* good king tears down the high places,
you quickly realize that the people were rebuilding the high places
as soon as the reformers left!

And so God commands Jeremiah:

¹² *Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say,
“Return, faithless Israel,
declares the LORD.
I will not look on you in anger,
for I am merciful,
declares the LORD;
I will not be angry forever.*

Turn to me, O ever-turning, Israel!
Shuva, meshuva Yisrael!

I will not look on you in anger, for I am *hasid* – I am faithful – I am loyal – I am steadfast.

The phrase “declares the LORD” occurs eight times in our passage for tonight,
reminding us that this is *God’s* message to us.

And God’s message to us is that there is hope – even for faithless Israel –
even for the people whom God divorced and sent away!

And the reason for that hope is because God will not be angry forever.

God is faithful.

He is *hasid* – he is loyal to his covenant.

His anger only exists because *you* are not *hasid*.

You are not faithful.

So how do we fix this?

Verses 12-13 show us that repentance is a necessary *condition* for salvation.

Repentance is *not* the *reason* why God will save us!

But repentance *is necessary* for salvation.

If you do not repent, you have no hope for salvation!

Verses 12-13 also describe true repentance to us:

Verse 12 has emphasized the importance of *turning* to God.

Verse 13 highlights the importance of “owning up” to our sin:

¹³ *Only acknowledge your guilt,
that you rebelled against the LORD your God
and scattered your favors among foreigners under every green tree,
and that you have not obeyed my voice,
declares the LORD.*

It’s so simple!

All you have to do is turn to the LORD with all your heart,
and acknowledge your guilt and admit your sins!

It’s true.

Repentance is *very simple*.

The first thing you have to do is admit that you were wrong.

As our Shorter Catechism puts it,
“Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner,
out of a true sense of his sin,
and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ,
does,
with grief and hatred of his sin,
turn from it unto God,
with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.”

True repentance includes *hatred* for sin.
When you apprehend the mercy of God in Christ,
you begin to grieve over your sin –
you hate what you once loved –
because you see what your sin did to Jesus!

3. “Return, O Faithless Children” to a New Jerusalem (3:14-20)
a. The Presence of the LORD *without* the Ark (3:14-18)

Verses 14-18 are at the center of our text.
You may have noticed the chiasm in the outline –
the 1-2-3-2-1 format.

Verse 14 is really important for understanding repentance:

¹⁴ *Return, O faithless children,
declares the LORD;
for I am your master;*

Perhaps better, “for I have mastered you” –
or perhaps, “I rule over you.”

There is some irony here.
The word for “master” is the verbal form of the noun “baal” –
the name of the Canaanite God.
But the LORD is asserting his sovereign ownership of Israel.

The solution to our fake repentance is found *not* in any action that begins with *us* –
but in what the LORD will do!

*I will take you, one from a city and two from a family,
and I will bring you to Zion.*

So long as God sits and waits for us to return,
nothing is going to change.
And so the LORD says in verse 15:

¹⁵ “*And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.*”

The shepherds of chapter 2 did not know the LORD.
But God will give shepherds after his own heart – like David –
who will teach and feed his people “with knowledge and understanding.”

With knowledge and understanding...

There are many who think that the human dilemma is a problem of knowledge.
And so the solution, they say, is education.
They are right!

It is true that our problem is a problem of knowledge.
It is true that the solution is education.

But the educational reform that we need is not
better Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math –
or more classical schools with Latin and Greek –

the knowledge that we need is *to know God himself!*

Verses 16-18 describe the glorious result of this knowledge as nothing less than a New Creation:

¹⁶ *And when you have multiplied and been fruitful in the land, in those days, declares the LORD, they shall no more say, “The ark of the covenant of the LORD.” It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed; it shall not be made again.* ¹⁷ *At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart.* ¹⁸ *In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers for a heritage.*

Notice how Jeremiah says this:

it’s not just that when God makes things right for Judah and Israel
that *signals* the restoration of the nations;
rather, when God makes things right for Judah and Israel
that *constitutes* the restoration of the nations!

Jeremiah is battling against how even the reform-minded era of Josiah
“stubbornly follows their own evil heart” –
and yet he sees that when Jerusalem is called the throne of the LORD,
all nations will gather to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem!

In Jeremiah’s day, the ark of the covenant of the LORD *was* the presence of the LORD.
We know that God is with us in Jerusalem because we have the ark.
But Jeremiah imagines a day when no one thinks about the ark –
no one cares about the ark.

In Jeremiah's day, Jerusalem is called "the throne of the LORD"
because the ark of the covenant is his footstool.
But Jeremiah imagines a day in which the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem
will be so powerful that all nations will gather to it –
even though there is no ark!
It's not just that treacherous Judah and faithless Israel will repent and return the LORD,
"all nations... shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart."
For Jeremiah, if all you want is the repentance of Josiah – one king –
that is pathetic!

God's promise is that *all nations* will be blessed through Abraham's seed.
You want reformation?
True reformation – true repentance –
comes when all nations no longer stubbornly follow their own evil heart.
And only then will we see the true place of Israel:

b. The Inheritance of Sons, or a Treacherous Wife? (v19-20)

¹⁹ "I said,
*How I would set you among my sons,
and give you a pleasant land,
a heritage most beautiful of all nations.
And I thought you would call me, My Father,
and would not turn from following me.*
²⁰ *Surely, as a treacherous wife leaves her husband,
so have you been treacherous to me, O house of Israel,
declares the LORD."*

God reflects on his promises to Israel –
"How I would set you among my sons, and give you a pleasant land."
Israel is my son, my firstborn...

If Israel was the firstborn son – then the rest of the nations are also sons!
(an implication that many Israelites had missed!)

But I thought you would call me, 'My Father' –
but instead you say to a tree, 'You are my father!' (2:27)

Israel is an ungrateful son – and a treacherous wife who betrays her husband with another.

What will Israel do?
Jeremiah suggests a prayer of confession (in verses 21-25):

2'. "Return, O Faithless Sons": A Voice of Confession (3:21-25)

²¹ *A voice on the bare heights is heard,
the weeping and pleading of Israel's sons*

*because they have perverted their way;
they have forgotten the LORD their God.*

First God speaks in calling them to repentance:

²² *“Return, O faithless sons;
I will heal your faithlessness.”*

Remember what I said about the word “faithless”?
It’s actually built off of the word “to turn”?
Return, O ever-turning sons,
and I will heal your turnings!

Not just “I will forgive” – but “I will heal.”
God has forgiven them over and over again!
But we need *more* than just forgiveness!
If God just *forgave* your sins, but did not *change* your heart
what good would that do?
You and I would just be like Israel – turning back, over and over again, to our sin!

And so the people of God reply:

*“Behold, we come to you,
for you are the LORD our God.
²³ Truly the hills are a delusion,
the orgies^[b] on the mountains.
Truly in the LORD our God
is the salvation of Israel.*

Our only hope is if the LORD our God comes to save us.
Make haste, O God, to save us!

Of course, God had said, back in verse 13,
that we need to acknowledge our guilt and confess our sin.

So we acknowledge in verses 24-25:

²⁴ *“But from our youth the shameful thing has devoured all for which our fathers labored, their flocks and their herds, their sons and their daughters. ²⁵ Let us lie down in our shame, and let our dishonor cover us. For we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day, and we have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God.”*

Our idols cannot save us.

We are covered in shame and dishonor.

The prophets frequently refuse to name the name of “Baal” –
choosing instead the name “Bosheth” – “shame.”

Israel now acknowledges that “the shameful thing” (Baal – the *Bosheth*)

has devoured all for which our fathers labored.

When you trust in idols, your idols will devour your increase.

Deuteronomy warns against three idolatries –
trusting in our own strength (militarism) –
trusting in our own righteousness (moralism) –
and trusting in our own wealth (materialism).

You can see the same tendencies today.

Americans tend to trust in our own strength to save us (and the rest of the world) –
sometimes with catastrophic effects.

Certainly American militarism is devouring all for which our fathers labored –
flocks, herds, sons, daughters...

Americans also tend to trust in our own righteousness –
it's a funny sort of righteousness –
since American moralism includes the celebration of adultery, abortion,
and the oppression of the stranger.

But that shouldn't surprise us – any time you trust your own righteousness,
you are already perverting what righteousness is!

And Americans tend to trust in our own wealth.

American materialism is legendary!

We look for mammon to save us – and so the economic collapse of 2008
devoured trillions of dollars.

The shameful things that we trust are destroying us.

The first step in repentance is to come to God honestly
and confess our sins – acknowledging our guilt and shame before him.

We need to have a healthy sense of shame.

We *should be* ashamed of ourselves.

We have dishonored our heavenly Father – our glorious Husband!

1'. "If You Return, O Israel": the Nations Will Glory in the LORD (4:1-4)

a. What Does True Repentance Look Like? (v1-2)

4 "If you return, O Israel,

declares the LORD,

to me you should return.

If you remove your detestable things from my presence,

and do not waver,

² and if you swear, 'As the LORD lives,'

in truth, in justice, and in righteousness,

then nations shall bless themselves in him,

and in him shall they glory."

So, if you return,
and if you remove your detestable things
and swear ‘as the LORD lives’ in truth, in justice, and in righteousness,
then the nations will glory in the LORD!
Swearing “As the LORD lives”
is not only a matter of worship –
an oath is also for business transactions, legal matters, international politics.

Jeremiah is describing a community characterized by truth, justice, and righteousness.
Idolatry and injustice always go together.
Repentance *must* entail a fundamental ethical change in us.
We are *no longer* who we once were.

But when the people of God live lives characterized by repentance –
that results in the *nations* giving glory to God.

So where do we start?
Look at verses 3-4:

b. Circumcision of the Heart (v3-4)

³ *For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem:*

*“Break up your fallow ground,
and sow not among thorns.*

⁴ *Circumcise yourselves to the LORD;
remove the foreskin of your hearts,
O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem;
lest my wrath go forth like fire,
and burn with none to quench it,
because of the evil of your deeds.”*

Circumcision was the ritual that brought people into the covenant community.
But God says that there is another circumcision that is necessary.

“Repentance involves a radical new beginning with God,
with a fresh surrender of heart, mind, and will, of worship and life,
to him as covenant Lord....
Without it, there could be nothing ahead but judgment...” (Wright, 90)

The law has established that Judah has no “right” of return.
The LORD has no obligation to take back his adulterous people.
The *law* has no answer for the sin and rebellion of Israel.

How do I circumcise my heart?
The only way that I can avoid the wrath of God is if I circumcise my heart.

Deuteronomy 30 spoke of the coming Exile:

“And when you all these things come upon you,
the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you,
and you call them to mind among all the nations
where the LORD your God has driven you,
and return to the LORD your God, you and your children,
and obey his voice in all that I command you today,
with all your heart and with all your soul,
then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you,
and he will gather you again from all the peoples
where the LORD your God has scattered you....
And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring,
so that you will love the LORD your God
with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” (30:1-6)

Jeremiah’s call to repentance peters out in 4:4

because Judah is unable and unwilling to circumcise their hearts.

They are too attached to their idols.

They will not repent and return to the LORD.

And so for 600 years, Judah remains under the threat of God’s wrath.

They are only in exile in Babylon for 70 years –

but after the restoration, the kingdom is not re-established.

The nations do *not* glory in the Lord!

That will only happen when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

If my salvation depends on my repentance, then I don’t like my chances!

But salvation belongs to the Lord –

and when God circumcises your heart,

as he did on the cross of Jesus! –

you are set free from the wrath and curse of God!