

Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

Lesson 30

The Cure For Backsliding

by Sharon K. Griffiee

The prophet Jeremiah is one of my favorite and most admired characters in the Old Testament. While it is easier to follow God when our circumstances are favorable, Jeremiah proves that a person can stick to their calling even when their pathway is paved with thorns. God chose Jeremiah before his birth, to fulfill an assignment that he (Jeremiah) would not have wished on anyone. At a tender age (about twenty years old), Jeremiah was commissioned by God to deliver a prophetic message that would bring loneliness, persecution and rejection upon himself. He tried to get out of his assignment, arguing with God that he was just a child and could not speak well.

Jeremiah 1:7-8 (NIV) - *But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.*

The Lord could not have made it clearer, Jeremiah's message would not be well received, and would in fact be received with a great deal of hostility. Knowing that his whole life would involve one struggle after another, Jeremiah drew spiritual courage to keep going. God's steady presence gave him the willingness to see beyond his own life, to pursue God's purpose, a purpose that was far bigger than himself. In his role of prophet, Jeremiah was to proclaim both salvation and judgment. The Israelites had backslid so far that they lost their reverential fear of God. They were basically resting on their laurels, clinging to the false hope that they wouldn't be punished for their wrong doing – after all they reasoned, they were God's chosen people. They felt that because God loved them, they could get by with disobedience; that they would not have to suffer the consequences of their actions.

To understand the tough message that Jeremiah had to deliver, it is important to take a brief look at the time in which he lived. Jeremiah grew up at a time (around 600 B.C.) when his nation of Judah was going through a national catastrophe. Babylon had become the leader of world affairs. The Judeans had turned away from worshipping the one true God.

Partly because of political reasons, they turned their back on God (their first love), to worship the pagan gods of their neighbors. They even brought hand made idols into the temple, flagrantly mixing their perverted worship with that of the one true God.

Jeremiah had the unpleasant task of pointing out that Judah's "unfaithfulness" to God was "sin". His voice could be heard day and night. He struggled to get them to change their way of life, so their nation would endure. He warned that going to God in repentance was the only cure for their sin against Him. He admonished those in rebellion against the Lord to acknowledge their guilt. He spoke the Father's heart to them.

Jeremiah 3:19-22 (NIV) - *"I myself said, "How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation. I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away from following me. But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel," declares the LORD. A cry is heard on the barren heights, the weeping and pleading of the people of Israel, because they have perverted their ways and have forgotten the LORD their God. "Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding."*

As unpopular as Jeremiah's message was, God's cry to the unfaithful is always to return to *Him*. For God is the only one who can cure (restore) the backslider to a healthy relationship with Him.

No amount of human effort can wash away the sin of rebellion. It is more than self-determination. It takes much more than getting up one morning and resolving to turn over a new leaf. Why? God, whom we have rebelled against, can no longer be avoided. When we backslide, we must answer the personal call to return to God Himself. We must go to God, acknowledge the error of our ways, and deal with Him directly. Turning to God in humble repentance is what brings God's forgiveness to our lives.

When faced with the choice, rather than taking a stand for God, the Israelites of Jeremiah's day chose to

backslide. In its truest sense, backsliding is not so much going back, as it is the refusal to go forward. To refuse to go forward with God is to refuse to seek His will. Therefore, without God's personal direction (his light), it is only a matter of time before everything starts falling apart. The people of Judah inevitably suffered the *consequences* of their actions. True to Jeremiah's prophecy, they were carried off into Babylonian captivity.

The Risen Christ Makes His Appeal

Turning to the New Testament, we find the risen Christ speaking to the Church at Ephesus about their backsliding. Though they had done many good things, something had gone wrong.

Revelation 2:4-5 (NIV) - "... I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place."

In these verses of scripture Jesus is asking the church at Ephesus to remember the relationship they once had with Him and to closely exam their lives. He is appealing to them to turn from the things of the world and back to Him, their first love. There is a warning attached. If they do not repent, He will remove their lampstand from its place. In other words, the light they had as a church would die out. This is what happens to churches, as well as to individuals, when we forsake our first love, Jesus. Having lost our light (our candlestick) through neglect of the relationship, we cease to witness for Jesus Christ. How then, do we find our way back to Him? Hear what the Spirit says.

Revelation 2:7 (NIV) - *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*

Three Steps To Overcoming Sin of Backsliding

Remember - Remember the height from which you have fallen. The first step is to recall what we once had and realize that something has gone wrong in our relationship with Jesus.

Repent - Once we realize that something has gone wrong in the relationship, we shouldn't throw up our hands and say, "I've messed up too badly to be

forgiven." The risen Christ says, "repent"! Repentance is the admission that the fault is ours and we accept full responsibility for our failure. The Prodigal's reaction is: "*I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned!*" **Luke 15:18 (KJV)**

Return - Bring forth fruits meet for repentance. Jesus tells us to do the things we did at first (**Revelation 2:5**). No man has truly repented when he does the same things again. The real proof of repentance is a changed life. For this change to take place, we must rely on God's grace to help us overcome sin. We must make every effort to cooperate with the grace of God. **Romans 5:20 (KJV)** says, "...*But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound...*"

Questions For Personal or Group Study:

1. Jeremiah was about 20 years old when he was commissioned by God to deliver a prophetic message to the Israelites. What argument did he give to God, hoping to get out of his assignment? Have you ever argued with God, hoping to get out of an important assignment?
2. Jeremiah had the unpleasant task of pointing out that Judah's "unfaithfulness" to God was "sin". What did he say was the only cure for their sin against God?
3. Despite the warnings, the Israelites in Jeremiah's day chose to backslide. In its truest sense, what does backsliding mean?
See: Jeremiah 8:5.
4. Once a person realizes that something has gone wrong in their relationship with God, there are usually two reactions a person might make. Which one describes your usual reaction? Why?
 - 1) I've messed up too badly to be forgiven.
 - 2) I will arise and go to God, I've sinned!
5. There are three steps to overcoming the sin of backsliding: **Remember, Repent, and Return.** Which step has been the hardest one for you to deal with and to follow through with personally?