

In chapter 3, God's relationship to us is shown as a husband and wife.

So, in verses 1-2, the sins of God's people is described in the context of marriage and divorce. If a woman left her husband for a different husband, and then came back to the first husband, basically going back and forth between husbands, it would degrade that woman, those men, and the society that accepted such a practice.

This is the spiritual lesson from Jeremiah. If the people were so complacent that they thought they could leave God for idols, and whenever those gods proved unsatisfactory, to presume to easily revert to God, then they needed the spiritual lesson of this chapter. God was taking them to divorce court.

This expresses our spiritual condition. We were officially in trouble with God. We did not simply leave God, but worse - we have aligned with another god. In fact, we did it repeatedly. We have been unfaithful to God with multiple other gods, multiple other partners. The phrase used in verse 1 is "*with many lovers.*"

It would be brazen for us to assume that we can always come back to God, and to expect or even demand that God will overlook all of our sins. And yet that highlights the beauty of the gospel lesson of this chapter- that God is so filled with mercy that **God pleads with sinners to turn back to Him through Christ Jesus.** We will unpack this in 3 steps: *genuine turning, acknowledging guilt, heeding God's call to turn.*

### **1. Genuine turning. (v.1-10)**

The issue in chapter 3 is the need for true repentance.

The people of God had been spiritually promiscuous. When they wanted rain out of the sky and grain out of the fields, rather than praying to God, they called out in prayer like the Canaanites, to nonexistent gods on every hilltop.

God exposes this in verse 2, "*Lift up your eyes to the bare heights and see! Where have you NOT been ravished? By the waysides you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness. You have polluted the land..*"

After the people turned to Caananite gods asking for rain, did they get rain? No. Since the LORD God is the God of the rain and the grain, in verse 3, God revealed how He withheld the rains, waiting for the people to turn back to God.

They needed to repent, but would not. The people did not get the results they were seeking, and yet they still would not turn back to God. The people remained unfaithful to God without any benefits, but the people did not blush, and did not feel shame for it.

In verses 4-5, the people further sinned by resuming their previous intimate talking with God, even resorting to their former spiritual words of affection. For these people, who had walked so far away from God to now lip-sync words that they did not mean - about God's fatherhood, God's friendship and (hint, hint) God's forbearance was not acceptable because it was not a genuine turning.

God asked in verse 1, "...*would you return to Me?*" In their supposed turning back to God, they were missing any sincerity and any radical change of lifestyle.

Now a bigger question arises - would God even be open to taking back His spouse after such bold-faced attempts at getting God's blessings without changing?

Yes, since God was the one who sent Jeremiah, there is hope of God the Husband taking His spouse back. God sending Jeremiah with this message shows that mercy overrides law. God will provide a way back to Him. The people could return to God, but it must be genuine, and it must be on the basis of God's mercy.

Wait, it might be good for the people to be reminded that the mercy of God was the basis of the covenant in the first place! The covenant showed that the love of God can redeem and renew the places that the law cannot reach.

In verse 6, the holy God spoke to Jeremiah about the sins of the people being unacceptable.

In verse 7, God was the husband who had always wished and anticipated that the people would return to Him, but they never did, and things got worse.

So, in verse 8, God sent away His people Israel with divorce papers, as it were, and the people of Judah did not even learn from that.

In verse 9, the people took their sins lightly, which showed that any attempts at repentance were still not real.

In verse 10, repentance is explained. What characterizes true repentance is turning back to God with our whole heart, while false repentance is pretending to turn back to God with our whole heart.

The way back to God is true repentance from the heart. With repentance, God will take us back. Without repentance, God will not take us back.

Why? Because the danger of spiritual adultery is in the subtlety of it. Adultery is in the heart. It is not enough to stop entering false temples and bowing down. Just as today, it is not enough to start coming back to church, as if your attendance itself were sufficient. The issue is our internal crying out to false gods to care for us. God demands that we cut all alliances with all wrong gods. True repentance means turning back to God and trusting Him alone to care for us. We must fall in love with our first husband again. God stands as our glorious husband, ready for us to love Him back.

In Revelation 2:4-5, Christ is speaking to the church, and saying, “...*I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.*”

Repentance is essential and non-negotiable. But repentance is not easy – like reciting a few words in church, as if we were actors in a commercial.

True repentance stops to consider the cost for God, for us to return to Him. It cost God the Father giving up His son, and Jesus giving up His life on the cross, in order for us to turn back to God and be received by God. This is mercy and grace.

Romans 5:1-2, “*since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through [Christ] we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand...*”

## **2. Acknowledging guilt. (v.11-18)**

In verse 11, God exposed the guilt of the people.

In verse 12, God told Jeremiah to tell them to return to God. What would God do if they returned? God answered that, saying, “*I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful,’ declares the LORD...*”

God has a way for us to get right with God, so that we will not wind up in the fires of hell, experiencing God’s anger for eternity future.

That way to God is clear in verse 13, “*Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the LORD your God...*”

What was needed was for the people, was to admit their wrongs.

Verse 14, God pleaded with the people to return to God, “*Return, o faithless children, declares the LORD, for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.*”

When it comes down to it, will God go through with the divorce? No. God is always thinking like a husband who wants to provide for His bride - verse 15, “*And I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.*” God promised to give the people good spiritual shepherds.

Even though the people broke covenant with God, God Himself will never break covenant with the people.

Rather, God keeps on making appeals and offers for a re-making of the marriage.

God has made a way that overcomes all the impossibilities.

God will pursue a wayward people, and make them into a nation restored, reunited, reinvigorated, with godly leadership providing shepherding care.

In verse 16, God envisions a time when the ark of the covenant is no longer the way to turn back to God. The ark shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed? How surprising! In verses 17-18, God started over and offered a new and different way for the people to leave their pattern of stubbornly following their own evil heart, and instead walk in the ancient blessings of their fathers and the land, and in a heritage of relating well to God. Ancient blessings, with a new way to get them. That brings us to the last section, verses 19-25.

### **3. Heeding God's call to turn. (v.19-25)**

Verses 19-20 do not sound like a new way to relate to God. Rather, it sounds like a repeating of the offenses. But God is not done.

God is vigilantly watching for a change of heart in the people! That is still a possibility which can yet be imagined by God! In verse 21, God Himself is envisioning that at any moment now, God could hear crying from a people who have perverted their way, and have forgotten the Lord their God.

Let's paint the scene in terms of marriage. Let's say that the faithless adulterous spouse of God shows up on the front porch of God's house and rings the doorbell of her former husband. And let's say that God answers the door, and the wandering wife is standing there on the porch crying, and she starts talking about being all wrong, and wondering whether they could start over together?

What would be God's response? Does there exist the possibility of starting over with a new relationship to God?

Before the wife could even express her repentance, we are given the beautiful answer in verse 22, *“Return, O faithless sons; I will heal your faithlessness.”*

This is a promise of God, that when the people return to God, that God will receive His people back, that God will welcome back His people, God will forgive and heal His people despite all of their many and evil wanderings.

Remember the prodigal son story in Luke 15? The son left his Father and eventually found himself in a pig pen, a real mess. From there, he decided to return to his father, and give a prepared speech, acknowledging his guilt, and finding a new way to relate to his father.

Here God is saying that sinners are in a real mess, so they must follow God's instructions very carefully to get out of the mess.

Step 1 – return to Me.

Step 2 - REPEAT AFTER ME.

Jeremiah 3:22b-23, *“Behold, we come to you, for you are the Lord our God. Truly the hills are a delusion, the orgies on the mountains. Truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel.”*

Turn back to God. Why? Because as verse 23 shows, following false gods deceives you, as verse 24 shows, following false gods costs you, and as verse 25 shows, following false gods shames you.

Here we have a prepared speech about God's past goodness, God's hope, God's disappointment, and a fresh scenario of how things could get repaired.

In summary, in our study of chapter 3, God is a husband speaking to His people and saying, "My dear wife, I have bad news and good news. The bad news is that you are wrong, and the good news is that we can start over, for I want you to come back home!"

Now we fast forward to the beauty of the book of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 31:3-4, "*I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel!*"

God loves with an everlasting love. The new way to relate to God is through the self-sacrificing love of Christ.

Ephesians 5:25-27, "*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.*"

Revelation 21:2, "*And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*"

Jesus Christ died on the cross to remove the spiritual promiscuity and to restore the spiritual virginity of His spiritual bride – we God's spiritual people.

The words of chapter 3 were first preached by Jeremiah in Jerusalem. Later, the words of chapter 3 were read by the people in exile. These same words speak to us in our day, as we read them through the lens of Calvary's cross.

In the short run, a band of exiles from Judah would be taken to Babylon, and then would be returned to Jerusalem and they would struggle to rebuild their temple, their city, and their way of life. But in the long run, this would all be transcended.

What is said in this chapter about shepherds feeding God's people, and the ark of the covenant, and nations, reveals the global scale of this chapter of prophecy. God's people will be well governed by the Good Shepherd of the international Kingdom of God, the one who would go on to fulfill the covenant, to which the ark of the covenant pointed. Jerusalem, and the preaching of repentance in her, would become the rallying point for all the nations to turn to God. Anyone who turns to God through the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep, will find in Jesus all the blessings of a whole new era of a new covenant.

Indeed that new covenant points ahead to the New Jerusalem, written about in Revelation 21 and 22, whose temple is the LORD God. That means Jesus is the center of our worship now, and Jesus will be the center of our worship in heaven.

Why would God open such a distant and glorious prospect to the sinning people of Jerusalem in the days of the prophet Jeremiah, who lived 6 centuries before Christ would come? Because in the heart of God, it was worth unveiling the hope that is in this chapter to an ancient people, who had turned themselves away from God.

It was worth it to reveal, because it showcases the love of God, and that gives us a hope that we can build our whole lives upon.

**Conclusion: 1) Remember God's mercy. 2) Turn back to God with your whole heart!**

**1) Remember God's mercy.**

One of the biggest roadblocks to repentance in our culture is the wrong ideas of the character of God – or what God is like.

If God were only a strict judge, then why turn back to God? We will be sentenced!

If God were only a mighty king, then why turn back to God? We will be punished!

Here in Jeremiah chapter 3, God reveals that his character is better compared to the Husband calling to his wayward wife to come back home.

God is our lover, into whose arms we can run, and receive the unconditional embrace of genuine love and everlasting acceptance. That is only possible because Christ received our sentence, Christ died receiving the wrath of God for us. Christ was punished for our sins. The punishment was finished, but Christ was not finished. Christ rose again. He will carry us home and keep us safe forever.

**2) Turn back to God with your whole heart!**

Jeremiah chapter 3 has a certain word that appears 18 times. That word is turn. This is a huge word theologically, ethically, even geographically. It is the verb to turn back, to return.

The prodigal son, in Luke chapter 15, after he had seen himself for who he was, suddenly understood His Father's love for the first time. This is the first step toward home, and the first step toward God. To know your own sins.

Embedded within turning back to God is the humbling task of acknowledging your guilt. It sounds so simple, but it is so hard to do. If I asked you to say whether or not we are all sinners who fall short of the glory of God, you would say yes. But then when I ask you the logical second step - to acknowledge

YOUR guilt, you say, ‘me, what guilt?’ Our first step on our journey back to God is to see our own wrongs. John Calvin started his famous book *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* by writing that our knowledge of ourselves and our knowledge of God are found together. In other words, if we are going to rightly know God, we must know ourselves. In order to turn back to a holy God, we need to acknowledge our guilt.

What must you do with your sins? Take them to God, and see that God’s solution for your sins was to place your guilt upon Jesus on the cross. Because of Jesus’ death there, the forgiving grace of God flows to us.

**1) Remember God’s mercy.**

**2) Turn back to God with your whole heart!**