

Broken, Black, and Appalled¹

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For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt; I am black; astonishment hath taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?

—Jeremiah 8:21–22

It is staggering to consider the legacy that will be left to our children if our Western nations continue along their paths of immorality and irresponsibility. There will be crippling economic debt; the moral landscape of our nations will be bleak. The reverberations of the sins of our day will be felt for generations to come if the Lord tarries. But have we considered what spiritual legacy we will leave our children if the church continues to be influenced and even lead in the sins of society and the culture? Have you ever considered what the church will look like if the current social and political conditions are prolonged? What will it take for the church to be revived and reformed in order to bring Spirit-worked change? The answer from our text is this: “when the church becomes convicted of God’s displeasure and repents of her complicity and toleration of the sins of our society.”²

The prophet Jeremiah brings this same message to the Israelites. He is a prophet to the nations, but he is called

1. This sermon was preached on the occasion of the 2014 mid-term elections in the United States.

2. Terry Schlachter, *The Next Great Awakening* (Grand Rapids: Ephesians 3:20 Publishing), Kindle Edition, Loc 571 of 2605.

first of all to address the people of God, those in special covenant relationship with God. He addresses the church in the Old Testament and his message is strikingly contemporary for the church today as well. If he addressed the people of God first, surely we ought to begin there ahead of the coming elections. America's greatest hope for change is not in the White House, the House of Representatives, the Senate, state legislatures, courts, or city councils. America's best hope for change is in Christians who weep for the state of the church, begin to pray for her revival, and intercede for her in her backsliding. This is what we learn from the prophet Jeremiah as he weeps over the state of God's people and as he sees the judgment of God in the future. He laments in Jeremiah 8:21, "For the hurt of the daughter of my people am I hurt; I am black; astonishment hath taken hold of me." He is broken; black is symbolic of the state of mourning and he is astonished or appalled at what he sees among the people of God and in the future in terms of looming judgment. He is "Broken, Black, and Appalled" 1) at spiritual apathy; 2) at impending judgment; and 3) at the refused remedy.

Spiritual Apathy

Jeremiah mourns because of the spiritual apathy of God's people. Apathy is a lack of concern for things that really matter. Spiritual apathy is a lack of concern for spiritual things. It's an "I don't care attitude." This is one reason why Jeremiah is appalled. He is to bring this message to those who are spiritually apathetic. This is reflected in several different ways.

Spiritual apathy is, first, *a refusal to repent*. God contends with His people in verses 4–6 in terms of their stubborn refusal to repent. Israel has turned to her own way, plunging headlong on a ruinous course. In verse 4, the Lord pleads with them, and I paraphrase, "If someone

falls, isn't it normal for them to get up? If someone loses their way, don't they return to their starting point?" It gives a picture of the spouse who refuses to ask for directions and continues to stubbornly drive on, putting the occupants of the car in danger. The condition of Israel is one of perpetual backsliding. There is no stopping them. They are like the horse rushing headlong into battle with one focus in mind. The Lord says, "They refuse to return; no man repented him of his wickedness." He compares them to the animals, and the animals come out looking intelligent and the people spiritually apathetic. They refuse to repent.

But that's not all. Their spiritual state is also reflected in *their failure to discern truth*. This lack of discernment begins with the scribes and the prophets, of all people. They have the law of the Lord, as we see in verse 8. They presume upon their knowledge of the law but they don't walk according to it. They boast of their wisdom but choose foolishness. They reject the word of the Lord in favor of their own wisdom (v. 9). They sow presumption and will reap judgment. They deal falsely with themselves and with the people. This comes through in the preaching of the false prophets. Jeremiah feels the hurt of the people as his own, but the false prophets only treat that hurt lightly by saying there is peace. In the words of Jeremiah 5:13, "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so." The prophets and the scribes fail to properly discern and apply the truth.

But spiritual apathy is also reflected in an *inability to feel shame* for their sins. That's the question that God asks of His people in verse 12: "Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? Nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush." They had become so hardened that they could no longer feel shame. It is

a picture of someone who knows what is right and yet chooses what is wrong. This is described in 7:26: “Yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck: they did worse than their fathers.” They became desensitized to sin. It shows a gradual slide into sin where sensitivity and shame are slowly dulled.

If Jeremiah is speaking to the people of God, then we need to take notice. These words of Jeremiah sound hauntingly familiar, don't they? We look out on the wider church and even among some here tonight, and we notice this spiritual apathy setting in—a refusal to repent, a failure to discern and apply the truth of God, and an inability to feel shame. We see in our own hearts a stubborn refusal to repent of the sins of wider culture. We need to own them as our own, not that we have committed them directly, but that we have not spoken out as we ought to and we have shown a general lack of concern for our own personal spiritual condition and the spiritual condition of the church as a whole.

How we must guard against the failure to discern and apply the truth of God correctly! How we must guard against “Band-Aid theology” which says that all things are well with the church when God is displeased. People in the church speak out against sin, but are we hurt for the hurt “of the daughter of my people”? Are we weeping and mourning and appalled at the spiritual condition of the church as a whole? We need to guard against an inability to feel shame for the sins we have committed. We need to be appalled at the sins that we see happening in the church and in our broader culture. Jeremiah is broken over the brokenness of his people. Are we broken when we see seminaries that were once faithful to the Word of God breaking away? Are we broken for the brokenness of denominations that were once sound and faithful and who are now anemic and tolerant of abominable sins such as homosexuality

and abortion? Are we broken for the spiritual apathy that we see in ourselves and in the lives of our children and our churches? This view of spiritual apathy ought to stir us up to cry out to God for revival instead of judgment—judgment that will be coming upon the church; perhaps it already is here because of spiritual apathy.

Impending Judgment

Jeremiah's sorrow and astonishment is multiplied as he is called to bring a message of solemn judgment to the people of Israel for their spiritual apathy. He sees off in the future what will happen if the people of God continue in this path.

The first part of this coming judgment is *utter barrenness* in terms of agriculture. In verse 13, we read God's own words, "I will surely consume them, saith the LORD: there shall be no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall fade; and the things that I have given them shall pass away from them." What a solemn message that is! Their spiritual barrenness and apathy will be reflected in the physical destruction of their vineyards and their fields. Their livelihoods would be destroyed. The gifts they had received from the Lord would only testify against them in judgment rather than leading them to repentance.

At that message of judgment, the people of Israel begin to find ways to protect themselves but God's judgment would leave them in *defenseless terror*. They tried to find protection by fleeing into the fortified cities. They speak to one another, "Why do we sit still? Assemble yourselves, and let us enter into the defended cities, and let us be silent there: for the LORD God hath put us to silence, and given us water of gall to drink, because we have sinned against the LORD." They know what they have done, but they choose rather to defend themselves against impending judgment.

They know they have sinned, but rather than confessing, they remain silent and blame the Lord for bringing them to silence. But God says in Hosea 14:2, “Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously.” They know they have sinned and yet they retreat into their own fortifications and silence regarding their sin.

Even hunkering down in their fortified cities cannot protect them from the judgment that is coming. In verse 15, we read their conclusion as they gather in their cities, “We looked for peace, but no good came; and for a time of health, and behold trouble!” They sought safety within the walls of the city, but they were only met with terror and destruction. All their presumption was met with sorrow and terror.

God’s judgment also came in the form of *foreign invasion*. And as they sought refuge in the city, this would not stop the impending foreign invasion of the Assyrians and Babylonians. Jeremiah prophesies of this in verse 16, “The snorting of his horses was heard from Dan: the whole land trembled at the sound of the neighing of his strong ones; for they are come, and have devoured the land, and all that is in it; the city, and those that dwell therein.” The massive and formidable army would be sent by God to destroy everything in its path. They would practice a scorched-earth policy, destroying everything, taking captive, and killing at will. This army is compared to creatures that would infest the land. “For, behold, I will send serpents, cockatrices, among you, which will not be charmed, and they shall bite you, saith the LORD.” Poisonous serpents would come for which there would be no cure. Judgment would be unstoppable and incurable. Death would be the end of it all.

How we need to take this passage to heart today! We need to ask the question, both corporately as the church

in North America and nationally: are we ripening ourselves for judgment? Is the clock almost done ticking? What of the scourge of sin plaguing the church? What of the influences of postmodernism, relativism, and religious pluralism which say that each can determine what is right for himself? What of 9/11? What of the economic downturn in 2008? What of acts of terror on our own soil and our troops fighting wars? What of the Ebola outbreak? What of ISIS flexing its muscles of terror and blood and extremism? Is the patience of the Lord coming to an end with us? We are called to weep, to be broken for the sins of the church in its silence and complicity and toleration of sin within its midst.

What about individually? Are there still those in our midst who seek their own defenses and remain silent under the hand of God even though they know their own sin? Oh, take this solemn passage to heart and turn to the Lord with fear and trembling and with words. Tell Him the situation you are in personally. Learn that running from the Lord will not work. Accusing Him will not work. Submitting and weeping before Him in repentance is the only way.

The Refused Remedy

What is even more astonishing and appalling for Jeremiah is Israel's refusal of the remedy. The remedy was right in front of them, and yet they streamed past it to their own destruction. They refused to acknowledge their rightful King; instead, they rejected Him. Not much had changed since the days of Samuel when Israel demanded her own king. There the Lord said to Samuel, "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me." This is reflected in the questions of verse 19, "Is not the LORD in Zion, is not her king in her? Why have they provoked me to anger with their graven images, and with strange vanities?"

This is the Lord speaking again of being rejected by the people. It's as if He's saying, "Here I am, but they have rejected me as their rightful King. I have made my abode in Zion and yet the people have forced me to flee." Is this what the Lord must say about the church in America and the West? He has sought to make His abode with us, but have we inevitably pushed Him aside and set up our own kingdoms in the church? These are hard questions, but ones that we must think about and answer corporately and individually, and then repent of. We need to look long and hard at ourselves as a local church and a broader church. We are being addressed today. It's not first of all the nation, though the United States and its citizens will be held accountable for what they have done in light of the gospel being preached across the nation, but we, *the church of God*, are being addressed by God Himself.

Not only has Israel rejected her rightful King, but they squandered glorious opportunities. They refused the remedy by squandering the gospel opportunities they received. In verse 20, this is especially addressed: "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." This is the voice of the people, acknowledging their hopeless spiritual condition. Here is spiritual fatalism at its worst. In a sense, it's another accusation against God: He had not saved them. They had looked for help in the time when it was best for wars to be waged (between spring and harvest), but no help came. The summer came and went. The harvest came and went and yet no one came to their rescue.

If they had listened to the voice of the Lord through the prophets, Israel would have recognized that He was giving them opportunity after opportunity for salvation. Everything in her midst spoke of salvation: the Tabernacle, the sacrifices, the prophets coming with the message of repentance. As Paul writes, "Who are Israelites; to

whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever” (Rom. 9:4–5). Yet they squandered every opportunity.

How we need to take this to heart! Beware of looking anywhere else for help to remedy the situation that we are in, both as a church and nation. Let us not waste the opportunities that God has given us to repent and apply to Him for help. He is the church’s hope and salvation. He alone is the sinner’s hope of salvation. Don’t squander the opportunities that God has given to repent and seek revival with humility.

What is most baffling about Israel is her rejection of healing balm. The words of the prophet come to a climax with these words in verse 22, “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?” The balm of Gilead was a well-known healing substance taken from the trees that grew in Gilead to treat wounds of every kind. Jeremiah uses this as a symbol of the healing balm that was available to the Israelites, which they openly rejected. For every prophet, for every preacher, that is the ultimate hurt—when people openly refuse to hear the Word of God. Will this be the perplexed question of faithful preachers written over our church here and over the wider church in North America—“Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” The physician has been proclaimed over and over, but have you brought your wounds? Have you come with our corporate wounds, with the sins of the culture that have crept in, such as the erosion of truth, a general apathy at the Word of God and its claims upon our lives, a resistance to Christ’s rule over our lives, the toleration of sin by church leaders across North America?

How we have fallen and failed to shine as a light in the world as a church!

And these are not only the words of Jeremiah to the Israelites; these are also the words of Christ as He wept over Jerusalem and her rejection of Him, the Balm of Gilead, the Great Physician. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate: and verily I say unto you, Ye shall not see me, until the time come when ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” And then again, when verse 35 was fulfilled and He came in triumphal entry in Luke 19:41–44, He repeats the same lament over the hardened spiritual condition of Israel. Even though her King was in Zion and her Physician was in Jerusalem, “when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation.” Once more the Lord comes to us with the gospel, with the healing balm as He passes through in warning.

How do we see the mercy of the Lord? He warns us today to repent. He gives another opportunity to turn to Him. He points out the grave condition of the church and the nation. He warns of judgment. As you go to the polling booth this week, how will you cast your vote? Will you be lamenting only for our nation? Or will you also be broken, black, and appalled at the spiritual condition of Christ’s

Bride? Will you go repentant and broken at your own sin? Will the sin of the church and the nation take you not only to the polling booth but to the foot of the cross, where our only hope for life is to be found? Amen.