

GET BACK ON TRACK?

Jeremiah 3:11-17; 4:1-4

After we have experienced set backs or major disasters that disrupt our lives, we will sometimes characterize the return to what is considered normalcy as “getting back on track.” I guess this idea comes from what needs to be done after a train wreck. We naturally think that we need to get the train back on the track.

What sorts of things happen to us, individually or as a group, that we might characterize as a train wreck? On an individual basis, a major health problem or major financial loss or loss of your job might all be in the category of a “train wreck.” If we look at the bigger picture of the region where we live, we might think of major weather-related events. Several areas of the country have experienced tornados this spring that have resulted in devastation that “train wreck” doesn’t even begin to describe.

Most of the time the only thing we think about and the entire focus we have is on healing and rehab (in the case of recovering from illness or injury) and rebuilding (in the case of weather related damage). We may occasionally give some thought as to how did this happen and we may seek to understand that we (perhaps) jogged on hard surfaces and damaged our joints or that we were involved in an auto accident many years ago that caused an injury that has resulted in the need for surgery. We might even figure out that smoking or drinking or some other activity resulted in problems. In the weather-related issues we might attribute the high number of tornados by cooling of the Pacific Ocean and the shift in the jet stream to explain how such things happen. For the majority of people, the question of “how did this happen” is very low on the priority list compared to getting back on track. It could be that the most important question that no one is asking is “why did this happen?” If we fail to address the question of **why**, then there is no reason for anyone to consider that perhaps the train was going in the wrong direction and that when it is put back on the track, then maybe it needs to be turned around.

In the latter days of Judah before the nation was destroyed by Babylon and many of the people were carried off to live in captivity for 70 years, there were many problems that plagued the nation and the people would respond with efforts to get back on track, but they continued to go in the same direction they had been going. God sent His prophets to proclaim a message that they were headed in the wrong direction.

During the time when Jeremiah was a prophet things were not going well for Judah. There were natural disasters, political unrest, significant influence from foreign nations – all of which were evidences that they had failed to be faithful to God (see Deut. Ch. 28). In addition to these problems, they had witnessed the fall of their fellow Israelites (the Northern Kingdom) to the Assyrians and knew that the reason for their problems was the fact that they had ignored God and failed to follow His commandments that were necessary for prosperity. It was not as if they did not know what was happening.

They were a lot more knowledgeable than they gave evidence of by the way they acted. We certainly know more than we practice. We tend to think that more education and knowledge and a clearer picture of God’s will for our lives would make us better people and give us more prosperity. However, the problems we have are mainly due to failure to follow what we already know rather than something that we are missing because of lack of understanding of a difficult concept or some passage of scripture. Someone once said, “I am not as concern about the parts of the Bible that I don’t understand as I am about the parts I do understand and have difficulty practicing.”

Is it safe to conclude that we will never turn the train around until we are willing to admit

that we have been going in the wrong direction?

Admit Guilt - 3:11-13

¹¹ And the LORD said to me, “Faithless Israel has proved herself more righteous than treacherous Judah. ¹² “Go and proclaim these words toward the north and say, ‘Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the LORD; ‘I will not look upon you in anger. For I am gracious,’ declares the LORD; ‘I will not be angry forever. ¹³ ‘Only acknowledge your iniquity, That you have transgressed against the LORD your God And have scattered your favors to the strangers under every green tree, And you have not obeyed My voice,’ declares the LORD. Jeremiah 3:11-13 (NASB95)

Why is it so difficult for people to admit that they are wrong? We have seen people in the news that were suspected of doing something wrong and they will not admit to having done anything wrong until they are totally out of options and then they might finally say “I was wrong.” That is not always the case since some people will continue in denial and will never admit being guilty. In the early part of Chapter three, Judah was confronted by God with a severe drought and the people did “sort of” respond by asking the question if God was angry with them? They went through a type of self judgment. They called to God, acknowledging Him as Father and friend. They admitted they realized He was angry with them and yet they just requested relief and did not pursue obedience. You could say that they just wanted to get the train back on the track but did not have any interest in turning it around to go in a different direction. This should remind us of the question Jesus asked, “Why do you call me Lord and do not the things I tell you to do?” (Luke 6:46)

During the past several years many so-called natural disasters and terrorists’ acts have rocked our nation. Yet no one is even turning to God to ask why He is angry with us. We have gone so far in “casting off restraint” that we hardly realize that God is trying to get our attention.

God reminded Judah through Jeremiah that Israel (Northern and Southern Kingdoms) was like His wife. Because of spiritual adultery, God had already divorced the Northern Kingdom. It had been more wicked than Judah and God had allowed Assyria to conquer them and the people were carried away as captives and dispersed among various nations. Judah had seen this but failed to learn from it. They, instead, sinned more than Israel did.

What we see starting in verse 12 of chapter 3 could be a bit of sarcasm. As we see in verse 11, Judah turned out to be worse than Israel. So God instructed Jeremiah to issue a call for Israel to come back and be restored. “Just admit your guilt and come back.” Could it be that God was suggesting that He divorced the wrong wife as a way to send a strong message to Judah? Another way to look at this is that if God was willing to bring Israel back after a century of being scattered through various nations (on the condition) if they would simply confess and repent, then He would surely be willing to be favorable toward Judah if they would do the same and simply confess and repent. Notice that Jeremiah was specific about the sin of spiritual adultery that God was concerned about.

The language that Jeremiah used to describe their sin was very suggestive of a promiscuous wife who was unfaithful to her husband. Why do you think that this sin was such a big deal with God? Another way of asking this same question is to ask why was this same issue addressed in the first four commandments that God gave to them through Moses? It is important because this is a foundational issue. This issue goes to the question of “what is the basis of all that are and all that we do?” What is our world view and what is it based upon? This is the very same issue that confronts us today. Even though we do not bow down to wooden and stone and gold idols, we do have other “gods” that have replaced Jehovah (the God of all Creation) with man-made ideas (not idols) and we “bow down” to these ideas in the same way that the ancient people bowed down to idols.

When God tries to get our attention with a “train wreck” and we are simply interested in

getting the train back on the track but refuse to address the basic (or foundational) problem, then we find that we are just another train wreck waiting to happen. In the language of Deuteronomy chapter 28 which is all about blessings and curses, we could consider the train wreck as a “curse” rather than a “blessing.”

Accept Blessings - 3:14-17

¹⁴ ‘Return, O faithless sons,’ declares the LORD; ‘For I am a master to you, And I will take you one from a city and two from a family, And I will bring you to Zion.’ ¹⁵ ‘Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding. ¹⁶ ‘It shall be in those days when you are multiplied and increased in the land,’ declares the LORD, ‘they will no longer say, ‘The ark of the covenant of the LORD.’ And it will not come to mind, nor will they remember it, nor will they miss it, nor will it be made again. ¹⁷ ‘At that time they will call Jerusalem ‘The Throne of the LORD,’ and all the nations will be gathered to it, to Jerusalem, for the name of the LORD; nor will they walk anymore after the stubbornness of their evil heart. Jeremiah 3:14-17 (NASB95)

The relationship that God has with His people has many different expressions or analogies. In verse 14, we see a switch from Israel being God’s wife to being God’s sons. The KJV did not quite make the switch in its entirety since the translators used the word “married” for the idea that God had a relationship of being “lord” over them. The word that is translated as “married” or “master” or “husband” (depending on your particular translation) is equivalent to “baal” which was the name used to describe the gods of the Canaanites. The message is quite clear in that God is telling His people that He is the One in charge and they should be looking to Him and not to the false gods of the Canaanites.

Most translations present verses 14-18 as a future happening. Young’s Literal Translation presents this a “past” and “present in the time of Jeremiah” account and is, therefore, not a prophecy of future events but is simply part of the ongoing indictment of God against the faithless people of Judah and Israel. The verbs in the Hebrew are “perfect” tense which is used with that which has already happened. The perfect tense is also used to state a future certainty as if it had already occurred. If the passage is correctly rendered as a future happening, then there are several possibilities as to when those events would or have occurred.

We can take them in chronological order. The earliest time would be when the Jews would return to the area after having been captive in Babylon. The shepherds would be men like Nehemiah or Ezra that were reform leaders during that time. Some have interpreted this future happening as the church in which the true Israel would be set apart and the shepherds would be those whom God had set in the church as apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastor-teachers. The next possibility would be the modern-day formation of the state of Israel in which many people of Israelite descent have returned to their homeland. The final possibility would be to have these verses apply to the millennial reign of Christ which is yet to come.

In all these aforementioned possibilities the Ark of the Covenant was (is) not a factor. The last mention of the location of the Ark was in the first temple that Solomon built. It is not mentioned after the destruction of that temple by the Babylonians. No one seems to know what happened to the Ark of the Covenant; however, it is clear that even before this time that it had ceased to be referenced as the reason that God dwelt in Israel. We also see from this passage that the Ark would not be made or constructed again.

The statement that Jerusalem would be called the throne of the Lord and nations would come to it does not seem to apply to the time when the Jews returned from Babylon. One could argue that this prophecy can be applied to the church and many think that this most directly applies to the millennial reign of Christ.

A time when people did not walk after the stubbornness of their evil hearts might be a temporary situation that would be applied to the nation during the time of Ezra when he called

the nation to repentance. It could be applied to the church which is made up of people who have died to the old Adamic nature and have been born again with a result that their hearts have been renewed and are being transformed to be in conformity with Christ. This will certainly be the case for those who are in Jerusalem during the millennial reign of Christ.

However, if we take these verses literally and read them in the past tense rather than future then we can see the following: God reminded Israel that He had chosen them and He had brought them to Zion. He had provided “shepherding” according to His own heart (King David). However, when they were multiplied and increased, they forgot about the fact that God was dwelling with them (as evidenced by the Ark of the Covenant) and they did not even mention it or do anything with it. Jerusalem was known as the “throne of Jehovah” and nations did come there for advice and favor (reign of Solomon). That situation was no longer the case but Judah had gone the way of Israel (Northern Kingdom) because of the stubbornness of their evil hearts.

Avoid Judgment - 4:1-4

¹“If you will return, O Israel,” declares the LORD, “*Then* you should return to Me. And if you will put away your detested things from My presence, And will not waver, ²And you will swear, ‘As the LORD lives,’ In truth, in justice and in righteousness; Then the nations will bless themselves in Him, And in Him they will glory.” ³For thus says the LORD to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem, “Break up your fallow ground, And do not sow among thorns. ⁴“Circumcise yourselves to the LORD And remove the foreskins of your heart, Men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, Or else My wrath will go forth like fire And burn with none to quench it, Because of the evil of your deeds.” Jeremiah 4:1-4 (NASB95)

These initial verses are part of the message God had addressed to the Northern Kingdom. In verse 3:12 God had invited Israel to return to Himself. These are the concluding conditions of their return. Just getting back on track is not enough and just changing direction in life is also not enough, we must change our direction so that we move toward God. When God called Abraham He promised that “in him all nations of the earth would be blessed.” The Israelites would be a part of that blessing if they would rid themselves of idols, stop straying away from God, and align their lives with the life of God. The ultimate fulfillment of this promise would be seen in the coming of the Messiah which would be from the tribe of Judah. This is why God continued to be redemptive toward Judah and Jerusalem.

God’s message to Judah was to cultivate the neglected “heart” relationship with God. Because the ground of their heart had been neglected, it had become as an unplowed field – hard and overgrown with thorns. The other metaphor used in the message was a plea for them to put away the carnal nature by circumcising their hearts. Without repentance, the nation of Judah could only look forward to the destruction that God was sending upon them from the north. This judgment would be like a fire that could not be put out.

If we fail to learn the lessons from the past, then we will repeat what has happen to others. Many of God’s prophets have all but become silent since the people have refused to listen. Though many “judgments” are available for all to see and from which to learn, yet people do not genuinely repent. For example: What happened after the disaster of 9-11? There were prayer meetings, special services, religious leaders were interviewed, churches sent counselors to New York to help people cope with the situation, and other things were started. People who had not been to church in ages started going. Where are we now? Back to where we started or maybe even worse than we were. Dare we call what happened “pretense?”