***Jeremiah 3:6-25 The Lord said also to me in the days of Josiah the king: “Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot. 7And I said, after she had done all these things. ‘Return to Me.’ But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. 8Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also. 9So it came to pass, through her casual harlotry, that she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. 10And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense,” says the Lord. 11Then the Lord said to me, “Backsliding Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah. 12Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: ‘Return, backsliding Israel,’ says the Lord; ‘I will not cause My anger to fall on you. For I am merciful,’ says the Lord; ‘I will not remain angry forever. 13Only acknowledge your iniquity,  
That you have transgressed against the Lord your God, And have scattered your charms To alien deities under every green tree, And you have not obeyed My voice,’ says the Lord. 14“Return, O backsliding children,” says the Lord; “for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. 15And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.***

We’re back with Jeremiah this evening. Remember that chapters 1 and 2 have examined how Israel has separated itself from God by it’s own choice. He has done nothing to deserve the treatment He’s received. He’s loved and protected Israel and Judah, while they’ve been an idolatrous and adulterous nation, committing harlotries on every hill, in every valley. Last service, we learned that there was indeed no place, in all of the Promised Land, that they had not been unfaithful for God. Tonight, we pick up in chapter 3, as God offers an avenue back into relationship with Him through repentance. He offers that to each and every one of us, and to this adulterous and idolatrous nation we live in.

Verse 6 *The Lord said also to me in the days of Josiah the king: “Have you seen what backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and there played the harlot.* God speaks through Jeremiah about Israel, which has already gone into exile in Assyria. Israel came to ruin by it’s own sinful choices. Josiah the King has started reforming Judah, making all efforts to turn the nation from its sin, and back to God. Josiah was diligent, but the people failed to be sincere. They were apathetic, loving the sin and the ease, rather than being energetic and enthusiastic for the things of God. This is hypocritical and God calls the nation out. He reminds them of what has happened to Israel. History can be a great teacher, but we must learn and understand. There’s an old saying, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” We see that in our nation and world today. The history of Israel would be in the recent memory of Judah. Jeremiah is prophesying only 60 or so years after Assyria conquered Israel. It would be like me asking if people remembered the Vietnam War, or Woodstock. Human memories are short and they soon forget and repeat mistakes. Israel had gone up on every mountain and under every tree. They openly sinned. Almost no one called sin sin. When we read the Books of 1st and 2nd Kings, we realize that Israel pursued mediums, practiced idolatry, and rebelled against God with false gods made of wood and stone. This should be a lesson to Judah, but the deceived rarely learn anything the easy way.

Verse 7 *And I said, after she had done all these things. ‘Return to Me.’ But she did not return. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it.* Israel had sinned and God had every reason to cast her off. Yet, He called to her to return. He loved Israel and wanted a restoration of relationship. The Hebrew has the idea that God will receive her again, even after being forsaken. God sent prophets. These prophets didn’t speak of reuniting with the House of Judah. These prophets called for returning to God. But, Israel refused! Talk about missed opportunity! Then, sister Judah saw this. Israel was a backslider, but Judah is called treacherous. Judah claimed to be the true worshippers of God. They performed all the right rituals and observed all the right festivals, but their heart was far from God. They praise Him with the mouth, not the heart.

Verse 8*Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I had put her away and given her a certificate of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but went and played the harlot also.* God saw perfectly. The Hebrew has the idea that He saw without any hidden places or shadows. He sees the hypocrisy of Judah. Judah has a perfect example of what happens as a result of rebellion, yet Judah pursues sin eagerly and cannot be discouraged from it. The calamity and disasters of Israel should have made the need for reform and repentance in Judah more urgent, but Judah ignores the lessons. God uses the visual of a man divorcing his adulterous wife, when referring to Israel going into captivity in Assyria. He gave her a bill or certificate of divorce. But Judah keeps barreling toward destruction, pedal all the way to the metal. She showed no fear or shame. Whatever form of sin and idol worship that was offered, Judah eagerly embraced it with lust in her eyes.

Verse 9 & 10 - *So it came to pass, through her casual harlotry, that she defiled the land and committed adultery with stones and trees. 10And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah has not turned to Me with her whole heart, but in pretense,” says the Lord.* The casual harlotry refers back to the eager embracing of whatever idol comes Judah’s way. Through the abomination of worshipping other gods made of wood and stone, the whole land became defiled. And, even after seeing Israel fall and having prophet after prophet warn, Judah refuses to acknowledge her guilt and turn back to God. God sent good kings, like Hezekiah and Josiah, yet the people reformed in word only. Their hearts remained far from God. The people acted the same regardless of the king. Bad kings encouraged the corruption and good kings barely slowed the moral decay down. The people set their hearts on godlessness. There is a saying that we cannot legislate morals. Laws may change external behavior, but God looks upon the heart. In the end, God will remove Judah just as He did Israel.  
Verse 11 *Then the Lord said to me, “Backsliding Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.*God now compares the two sister kingdoms. Judah thinks itself more righteous and pious. Even in Jesus time, we find that the Jews wouldn’t go near to Samaria. But God sees that Judah is more guilty than Israel. Israel committed numerous sins. They threw off the worship of God earlier. Yet, Judah had the example of Israel and chose to sin anyway! God says – Israel has shown herself more righteous! But we must not be misled by our human way of thinking. Sin is sin… it doesn’t matter the bucket we put it in. When we compare sin and try to make one not as bad as the other, instead of repenting and fleeing from all sin, we only justify ourselves. God speaks of Judah and Jerusalem’s rebellion and filth very clearly in Ezekiel 16:46 – *Your elder sister is Samaria, who dwells with her daughters to the north of you; and your younger sister, who dwells to the south of you, is Sodom and her daughters.* Listen to verse 48 though - *As I live,” says the Lord God, “neither your sister Sodom nor her daughters have done as you and your daughters have done.* And listen to verse 51 *Samaria did not commit half of your sins; but you have multiplied your abominations more than they, and have justified your sisters by all the abominations which you have done.* Clearly, Judah is in complete rebellion against God – Sodom and Samaria are less of an abomination. This would have been shocking to the people of Judah.

Verses 12-13 *Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: ‘Return, backsliding Israel,’ says the Lord; ‘I will not cause My anger to fall on you. For I am merciful,’ says the Lord; ‘I will not remain angry forever. 13Only acknowledge your iniquity, That you have transgressed against the Lord your God, And have scattered your charms To alien deities under every green tree, And you have not obeyed My voice,’ says the Lord.* God now commands the prophet Jeremiah to direct his words northward, toward Assyria and the ten tribes of Israel that are in captivity. Assyria is north of Judah. The words God commands call for Israel to repent of the backsliding and return to the reverence for God. When they do this, God will be merciful and not cause anger to remain on Israel forever. He is slow to anger and quick to forgive, as Psalm 103:8 tells us - *The Lord is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy*. The people and the nation must acknowledge the sin, confess the sin, and forsake the sin. God brings Saving Grace as close as our simply repenting and asking, yet we still miss the mark so often. When we truly grasp the number of our sins, the way they grieve the Holy Spirit, and our unworthiness of forgiveness, we grasp the greatness of the Salvation through Jesus Christ. The prophet reminds Judah that God has taken them as His children, His peculiar people, and made a covenant with them. Yet, they have chased aliens and strangers. Often, heathen worship took place on altars located in groves of trees and under large trees, thus the words – under every green tree. The people have not obeyed God’s voice. Their sin is not a sin done in ignorance, but a sin done in disobedience. They’ve ignored the counsels of scripture, prophets, and experience.

Verse 14 *“Return, O backsliding children,” says the Lord; “for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.* God now confirms that He is in covenant with the Children of Israel, despite their unfaithfulness. God stands ready to renew the people. God has been a faithful protector, keeping His promises. He has performed His duty in this covenant. Now, He urges Judah, as well as Israel, to return and fulfill their duty. God will receive the remnant of the people willing to return. Remember that only a small portion of the people returned to Jerusalem. Most chose to remain in the old Babylonian empire, where they had ease and comfort. When King Cyrus releases the people, it is a very small remnant that comes home – only about 42,000 of the hundreds of thousands led away into captivity. Many theologians also apply this to the way that the Gospel will be accepted. It will be accepted one by one, not whole nations… two in the family will believe while others refuse. Accepting Jesus is an individual work.

Verse 15 ***And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.*** In the future, when Christ rules, the people will be led by pastors and shepherd that are faithful. They will believe and follow the Bible and lead the people to do likewise. These pastors will be faithful to their duty and to the worship of God. They will act as governors and rule the people reverently, always seeking God in every decision. They will teach the Word and demonstrate the character of God. These will be pastors and shepherds after God’s own heart, taken from the mold of David. They will feed and not fleece the flock, as one witty theologian wrote. Wisdom, discernment, integrity, and love will be hallmarks of these leaders. God’s Word, the Word become flesh, Jesus Christ, will be the food the sheep are given.

And so we depart from Jeremiah tonight. He is calling for repentance and return. He is calling for people to stop rebelling and become obedient to God. The people of Judah think that Israel was punished because they were so much worse than Judah, yet God says that Judah is the treacherous sister, behaving worse than Israel or Sodom. This should be a great wake up call for the people, but, like humans then and humans now, our sin makes us deaf and blind. Only Jesus can heal us, causing us to see and hear again. It was true in Israel. It was true in Judah. It is true in America and around the world today. May we awake and repent.