



Break Up Your Fallow Ground! (Jeremiah 3:6-4:31)

1. Time: *The days of Josiah the king, 627–609BC (v6)*. 627BC starts Jeremiah's call, and 609BC marks Josiah's death. Jeremiah began his ministry in 628BC, a year after Josiah began the national spiritual reform (2 Chr 34:3). This prophecy forms part of Jeremiah's early messages from around 620BC.
2. Structure: From Anathoth Jeremiah looks to the north and yearns for the northern tribes of Israel to return to the Lord. The message starts with a strong note of hope. Then suddenly it turns dark, finishing with a woman crying out, being murdered in cold blood by her treacherous lovers.

The first half of Jeremiah's prophecy here (3:6-4:2) is mostly to the northern kingdom of Israel, who has already gone into exile. In the second half (4:3-31), he is speaking primarily to the southern kingdom of Judah, who faces the same judgment unless she repents.

3. Keywords:
 - i. 'Backsliding Israel' - Jeremiah says the word 'backsliding' 7 times (7:6, 8, 11, 12, 14, 22).
 - ii. 'Treacherous Judah' - Jeremiah says the word 'treacherous' 6 times (3:7, 8, 10, 11, 20).
 - iii. 'Return' ('shuv': repentance) - Jeremiah says the word 'return or come home' 8 times (3:7,10, 12, 14, 22, 4:1).

A. Message to the North: 'Backsliding Israel' (3:6-4:2)

1. The picture of God's people in this message takes various forms - sisters, spouses, sons, etc. God sees His people primarily as His family. God has chosen Israel to be His first family - 'faithful wife', 'beloved children', 'true daughters and sisters'. God chose Israel and put her in the beautiful land of promise, but He was abandoned, used, and lied to by the very one whom He loved (3:6-4:2).

Jeremiah opens the prophecy with the picture of two sisters who were God's daughters. Judah was the older sister and Israel was the younger sister.
2. Renegade Sisters (3:6-12)
 - a. Israel, the younger sister, went off and played the harlot on every high mountain and under every green tree. Israel left God because she was a faithless backslider. Judah, the older sister, looked at Israel and said, *'I want to go after her too.'* Though when God asked Judah, *'Are you going too?'*, she said to Him, *'No, Dad. I would never do that to you.'* But her heart had already left Him, and soon she too went off and left God.
 - b. Judah's sin is far worse than that of her younger sister, Israel, because Judah 'pretended to be faithful to God.' Israel left God and paid for her sin. Israel didn't have the benefit of seeing the consequences of being unfaithful. But Judah witnessed with her own eyes what happened to her wayward sister, Israel, and *still she did not fear God (v8)*. She not only committed the same spiritual harlotry after seeing what happened to Israel, but Judah dared to deceive God with a shallow superficial 'pretence' (v10). So, God pronounced Judah more guilty than Israel. Judah was guilty of 'unfaithfulness' as well as 'deception'. She was treacherous.
3. Rebellious Wife AND Prodigal Sons (3:14-4:2)
 - a. God says eight times to the backsliding Israel, 'Return!' How was Israel to return to God? *'Only acknowledge your iniquities and return.'* (v13) Confessing our sins is a humbling experience and it produces repentant spirit in us. True repentance results in both the *forgiveness of sins* AND a *contrite heart that enables intimate walk with God*. (C.f. 1 John 1:9) This was God's counsel to Israel on how they were to return Him, wherever they were scattered away from their land.
 - b. God pleads with the scattered exiles of Israel, *'Come home, for I am married to you. You have been punished enough. You have lost your land. I am no longer angry with you. If you return to*

Me individually, I will bring your remnants back to the land, one from a city and two from a family, and I will give you good shepherds to feed you and lead you.

On that day I will be so real to you that you won't need the ark of the covenant or even talk about it. I will give you My own Presence and Jerusalem will become 'My Throne' over all the earth. And I will make you into a powerful influence to bless the nations of the world once again.

Not only that, but I will also give you your land back, and I bring you, Israel, and your sister, Judah, back from the foreign land, to live together as one family again. I will do all these things for you. Just come home.'

- c. God's dilemma: 'How can I put you among the children and give you pleasant land, a beautiful heritage of the nations?' (v19) '...you call Me, 'My Father' and then you turn to deal treacherously with Me repeatedly!' (v20).

God's solution: God 'prophetically' hears the voice of true repentance from 'desolate heights' where Israel formerly committed harlotry, the 'voice of weeping and supplications of the children of Israel.' (v21) And He pleads with them, 'Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backsliding.' (v22) (c.f. Hos. 6:1)

4. Jeremiah gives the very words for the Prodigal Israel to speak to God as they return. It is not easy to know the right words to say after a long estrangement. Jeremiah provides no excuse, no justification, but simple words of genuine repentance and return. '*Indeed, we do come to You, for You are the LORD our God. Truly in vain is salvation hoped from the hills, from the multitude of mountains [place of idolatry]; Truly, in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel. For shame has devoured the labour of our fathers...and reproach covers us. For we have sinned against the LORD our God...*' (v22-25)
5. God responds as He awaits Israel's return in the future:
- a. '*If you will return, O Israel,*' says the LORD, '*Return to Me.*' (4:1) In other words, 'It is to Me you must return, not just to the land.' (4:1)
- b. '*And you shall swear, 'In truth, in judgment (justice), and in righteousness.'*' (4:2) True repentance always leads to inward reform. Situational repentance is just happy to get out of trouble. This is true for the church as it was for Israel.

B. Message to the South (Judah & Benjamin): 'Tracherous Judah' (4:3-31)

1. We must reject the sentimental view of God as a cuddly grandpa who can never discipline His children. God the Father can and does discipline His children. If God never gets angry, we don't have to truly fear God.
2. The Lord speaks to the 'men of Judah and Jerusalem' (4:3). The divine call to repentance goes out to each individual man because God's judgment against the nation can no longer be averted. National disaster is surely on its way. Now each individual person had to respond rightly to God to escape His judgment. How then are the men of Judah to respond to God?

Jeremiah warns Judah to quickly do two things to be saved from God's anger that burns like fire

- a. 'Break up your fallow ground and do not sow among thorns.' (v3) They were to break up the hardened soil of their heart, or their hard hearts will simply choke the word of God preached to them. Jesus spoke of the same parable (C.f. Matt 13). The hard ground of their hearts had to be ploughed to be softened, so that God's word can enter in deeply and bear fruit.
- b. 'Circumcise yourselves to the LORD and take away the foreskins of your heart.' (v4) Circumcision is a painful process at first. It symbolises the taking away of our fleshly nature, hardened due to continual sin, evil lusts, and appetites of the heart. So that we will be sensitive and receptive to the Lord.

3. Jeremiah sees a sudden series of visions into Judah's future, which shakes him up.
 - a. *'Blow the trumpet (shofar) in the land.'* (v5-6) God's judgment on Judah will take the form of a sudden military invasion (Joel 2:1; Amos 3:6). This sound of shofar was equivalent to the siren going off today, and people running for refuge, like the 'underground bunker' today. Great military destruction will be brought to Jerusalem by the Lord Himself.
 - b. *A prowling lion has come up from the thicket and the destroyer of nations in on his way.'* (v7) Lion was the symbol of Assyria in the 6th century BC, and of Babylon. Lion represented the fierce anger of the Lord which has not turned back from Judah and Jerusalem. (v8)
 - c. The total collapse of leadership: Princes, priests, and prophets will be confused altogether (v9). Why? Israel's leadership structure was founded upon the 'false peace' prophesied by the false prophets. But the truth was that the sword of judgment was stretched towards their very hearts (v10). At this point, even Jeremiah seems overwhelmed and confused (v10).
 - d. Jeremiah sees a sudden 'hot dry desert wind' (v11) blowing into the desolate heights of Judah, the places of their idolatry. It was not the wind for winnowing or cleansing for the grains of the harvest. The strong wind was of judgment that will burn up the ground (v12). Jeremiah then sees the enemy's chariots and horses moving into the land of Judah with such violent speed, that he sees them as the whirlwind, cloud, and swooping eagles, moving in to 'kill and to plunder' (v13).
Jeremiah pleads with the people of Judah to turn from evil and repent (v14). His prophetic ears were hearing the sound of affliction and pain coming from Dan from far north and from Mt Ephraim just 10 miles north of Jerusalem (v15). He can also hear the voice of the watchers, i.e. the besiegers, surrounding the city of Jerusalem all around. (C.f. 18 months of siege 588-586 BC).
Why was this sudden disaster coming? 'Your ways and your doings have procured these things for you. This is your wickedness, because it is bitter, because it reaches to your heart.' (v18)
4. Jeremiah's anguish and final admonition (4:19-31)
 - a. *'O my soul, my soul'* (NKJ) or *'My anguish, my anguish'* (RSV). Jeremiah was deeply distressed and anguished in his soul because of what he has seen and heard in the vision (4:19-31). His heart was pounding so much in uncontrollable inner turmoil that it was hurting him. *'My heart makes noise (moan) in me.'* (v19) Jeremiah was 'living the vision', hearing the sound of the shofar, and the land being plundered by the invaders, including his own place! (v20) He doesn't want this vision to continue. (v21)
 - b. Jeremiah was the prophet of the heart. The heart is mentioned 60 times! He grieves over Judah's evil heart that caused the calamity. His people were 'professionals in doing evil, but in doing good they are amateurs!' (v22)
 - c. Jeremiah then enters a sweeping vision of the wrath of God over Israel. (v23-29) He uses the phrase 'formless and void' ('tohu' and 'bohu' C.f. Gen 1:2). The nation will be so destroyed, that it is likened to the dark, formless void – the chaotic shapeless state the earth was in, before God creates order and beauty in the world. The promised land flowing with milk and honey will be utterly destroyed. Why? Because Judah has not repented, and neither has God relented. *'I have purposed and will not relent, nor will I turn back from it.'* (v28)
 - d. Jeremiah asks the unrepentant Judah, *'And when you are plundered, what will you do?'* (v30) He sees Judah turning to the tools of her trade, wearing alluring garments and ornaments, and painting her eyes to entice the invader. (v30) But it will not work. Jeremiah sees the vision of Judah dying like a woman in labour of childbirth gone wrong. All her plans are miscarried. Unbeknown to Judah, her lovers were not seeking her love, but her life! So, Judah will die in the hands of her treacherous lovers. (v31) Why was this happening to Judah? Because Judah was treacherous. She pretended to love God when she didn't. Her sins will catch up with her. Israel was scattered to the nations. But Judah will be murdered by her lovers.

C. Summary

1. God hates pretence. Israel was apostasy personified. Judah was treachery personified. Apostasy is open backsliding. Treachery is betrayal with deception. Which was worse? The Lord pronounces Judah is worse than Israel. Israel was guilty of unfaithfulness, but Judah was guilty of both the 'unfaithfulness' and 'treachery'. Jesus warned the lukewarm Laodicean church to be either 'hot' or 'cold', otherwise, He would vomit them out of His mouth.
2. Intercession for Israel. Jeremiah 3 is an up-to-date and current prophecy for Israel's restoration. Israel has come back to her land. But God wants Israel not just to come back to the land but come back to God Himself. He wants spiritual reform – to serve the Lord In truth, in justice, in uprightness. That's the prophet's cry to Israel. Come home to the Lord Himself!
3. Repentance. 'Break up your fallow ground and circumcise your heart'. God wants more than situational repentance that just wants to get out of trouble. He wants deep repentance which leads to the reformation of each person's heart and life. It starts with the confession of our sins that produces brokenness and contrite heart.

There is a repentance movement in the USA and the nations, including Australia. What kind of repentance do we have? Where are the nations in the scale of God's justice?