

## “Plow Your Fallow Ground,” Part Two (Jeremiah 3:21–4:4)

By pastor Jeff Alexander (1/5/2019)

### Introduction

1. As observed in the first part, this prophecy of Jeremiah begins with some very bad news.
  - a. In light of Deuteronomy 24:1–4 and the fact that Israel broke covenant with Yahweh, Chapter 3 opens with the problem of how the Lord could take His divorced wife (Israel) back again?
  - b. Nevertheless, Israel was urged to return to Him as He related various proofs of her *backsliding* (translated “*faithless*” in the ESV; 3:6–20).
2. How could the Lord promise to heal her apostasy and call for the nation to return to Him when that option was out (v. 22)?
  - a. At least two things are in play here: (1) the guilt of the nation—Israel’s persistent violation of her covenant with the Lord—is proven by *her* refusal to return to Him in repentance. (2) Nevertheless, grace was given to some, the remnant who were enabled to hear and obey, their obedience clear proof of this gracious work of God.
  - b. The charge against the nation began with “*Lift up your eyes to the bare heights and see! Where have you [the unfaithful wife] not been ravished*” (freely given yourself to idolatry; v. 2, then compare verse 21). Those *weeping* in verse 21 are the remnant of verse 14 who are repenting and returning!
3. Also in review, this breaking of the covenant is called *backsliding*.
  - a. The term, used 7 times in Jeremiah 3, describes a total rejection and abandonment of the Lord and His covenant in pursuing sinful desires.
  - b. The term describes an *apostate*, not, as is often wrongly used, an out-of-fellowship Christian.
  - c. Only a gracious supernatural work in the heart of the backslider will enable him to return to the Lord.
4. God permitted the apostasy of the nation of Israel as the means to establish the Christ as the true and faithful Israel (compare Matthew 2:15 with Hosea 11:1; Exodus 4:23; Psalm 2:7; Galatians 3:16).
  - a. Jesus, as the true Israel, faithfully fulfilled all covenant obligations, the dominion mandate (Genesis 1:28), and the expansion promised by covenant to Abraham (Genesis 12:3).
  - b. In order to bring this purpose to reality, the Lord also called a faithful and spiritual remnant within the apostate nation (Jeremiah 3:14–18; 21–23).
5. The focus of this second part is on the responsibility of humans to repent and return to the Lord and be obedient and faithful to covenant obligations.

### I. Return to Me

1. The Lord cautioned the repentant to beware that, in their return, they must return to *Him*.
  - a. The repentant must not merely return to their former religious activity but *seek Him* with all their hearts.
  - b. Some have suggested this passage records only a half-hearted confession of the guilty nation. However, in my opinion, too many things in the passage show the response to the call to return of a remnant through the election of grace.
  - c. A solemn warning to contemporary believers is that their own repentance must be God-given and genuine (Deuteronomy 10:20).
  - d. The evidence of this genuineness is stated: “*If you swear, ‘As the Lord lives,’ in truth, in justice, and in righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory*” (4:2).
2. The Lord cautioned the repentant of their personal responsibility, which involved removing the detestable things formerly embraced.

- a. These detestable things were the abominable idols, an idol being anything that replaces the Lord in one's affection.
  - b. Because their hearts were very deceptive, they needed also to *persevere* in their resolve and not waver.
  - c. Repentance and returning to the Lord requires the repentant acknowledge the guilt of rebellion and betrayal (3:13), the repentant submit to the Lordship of Christ (3:14), the repentant remove all detestable things and do not waver in the commitment (4:1).
3. A repentant and faithful life lived to the glory of God results in the church's fulfilling its mission as a witness to the nations (3:17; 4:2).
- a. We are not called to convert the world, which is the Lord's work. We are called to be faithful witnesses of the glorious Savior, reflecting Him in the world.
  - b. If we demonstrate that the "*Lord lives*" (that He is real and active in our world), then the nations will bless themselves in Him and honor Him, not the false gods they have served (Isaiah 65:16).

## II. Prepared Ground

1. Believers must take steps to prepare for the fruitful and productive work to which they are called, as seen in two metaphors.
- a. Believers must plow their *fallow ground*—land that is uncultivated, useless, and overgrown with weeds. In this, the Lord mocked the people's trusting the fertility god, Baal, to bless their agriculture. In reality, the people's spiritual lives were barren, fruitless, and weedy. The Lord, not Baal, would make them fruitful for His glory (John 15:1–11).
  - b. A second metaphor is *circumcision* (v. 4), the sign of the covenant that identified the members of God's community. Although required of Israel, circumcision was external and in no way guaranteed the salvation of one bearing the sign (Galatians 5:6; Romans 2:29). The Lord, therefore, qualified the sign, requiring an *inward* life-altering work that would truly mark the bearer as a genuine covenant-keeper (Deuteronomy 3:6; Galatians 5:16–25).
2. The Lord warned that failure to act would put Judah in danger of His wrath (4:4).
- a. They must repent and reform lest His fury break forth like fire, which He was now ready to do with nothing to stop punishment.
  - b. This wrath was kindled against their evil doings for which they were fully responsible.
  - c. The consideration of that imminent danger should awaken them to serious self-examination (2 Corinthians 13:5).

## What to Take Away

1. As with Israel, new-covenant believers are in a constant war with their own flesh but are given, by the mercy and grace of God, all the means to gain victory in their spiritual walk. They have the Spirit of God and are admonished to "*walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh*" (Galatians 5:16). They have the Word of God: "*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life*" (John 6:63).
2. Nevertheless, each is responsible to prepare his own heart for God's gracious work. Remove the weeds that would choke the Word: "*Purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God*" (Hebrews 9:14). Be careful about what is sown: "*For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life*" (Galatians 6:8).
- "Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you"* (Hosea 10:12).