

“Plow Your Fallow Ground” (Jeremiah 3:21–4:4)

By pastor Jeff Alexander (12/28/2019)

Introduction

Today we stand at the door of a new year, and, as usual, two things come before us to consider.

1. First, we like to take stock of the past year and evaluate all we have done considering God’s will and purpose for us.
2. We should resolve to make 2020 an opportunity for renewed desire to follow Christ and advance the kingdom of God.
3. The text before us encourages us to this very task: “*Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns. Circumcise yourselves to the Lord*” (vv. 3, 4). We will take this up in two parts.

I. Backsliding

1. The prophecy of Jeremiah begins with some very bad news.
 - a. In light of Deuteronomy 24:1–4 and the fact that Israel persistently broke covenant with Yahweh, how could the Lord take her back after He had once divorced her (3:1–5)?
 - b. Nevertheless, Israel was called to repentance as the Lord related various proofs of her *backsliding* (translated “*faithless*” in the ESV; 3:6–20).
2. The Hebrew term for *backsliding* in the KJV, *faithlessness* in the NASB and ESV, or *apostate* in LEB means to *turn away* or *depart* from the Lord and one’s covenant obligations.
 - a. *Backsliding* is found 10 times in Jeremiah (7 in chapter 3; the rest in 8:5; 31:2 and 49:4). The only other occurrence of the word is in Hosea (3 times: 4:16; 11:7; and 14:4).
 - b. The term is the negative of repentance as seen in the plea for Israel to “*return*,” which assumes a *falling away* necessitating the return.
 - c. The emphasis of this message is that Judah was under the threat of imminent judgment due to her faithless regard for her covenant with the Lord. The backsliding of these two sisters did not rendered the Lord’s purpose void because His gracious plan was a new covenant characterized by faith, not DNA and included a host of Gentiles. Repentance focused on those who would hear and respond in faith and obedience.

II. A Voice Heard

1. The glorious hope of Israel was awakened when the prophet heard a voice on the bare heights (3:21).
 - a. The voice weeps and pleads, the sign of true brokenness and lamentation over sin and its fruits (Nehemiah 1:4; Ezra 9:5, 6; Daniel 9:3; Jeremiah 9:1; 50:4).
 - b. Brokenness with weeping and lamentation is and must be the precursor of repentance. This is the emphasis of Jeremiah (4:19; 2 Corinthians 7:9), but do not mistake *sorrow* for *repentance* (2 Corinthians 7:10, 11).
2. Two things describe the need for repentance (v. 21).

- a. Israel had *perverted* her way, the term implying iniquity, the self-willed determining of one's way, not the will of God.
 - b. Israel *forgot* Yahweh their God, the term implying that they chose to ignore the One with whom they were joined in covenant but in their iniquity put out of their minds.
3. Brokenness is followed by the Lord's invitation: "*Return [shuwb, repent] O faithless [mashubah, backsliding] sons*" (v. 22).
- a. This is a play on the Hebrew term.
 - b. The Lord makes a glorious promise, one which will be fulfilled only under the new covenant: "*I will heal your faithlessness.*"
 - c. Verses 23 through 25 record the prayer and confession of the penitent with their faith and holy resolve to return: "*Truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel.*"
 - d. Observe the content of their confession as to the bankruptcy of their ways. They acknowledged that the worship of false gods was a mere delusion. They realized their acts were shameful, costing them dearly both spiritually and materially. They conceded that they fully deserved the shame and dishonor they experienced. They confessed that their sin resulted from not obeying the voice of the Lord.
3. Backsliding is often used in evangelical circles to describe people who fallen into sin or backed off from active participation in the church—"So-and-so is a believer but is backslidden."
- a. The term, however, describes an *apostate*, not a disobedient and unfaithful Christian.
 - b. Israel was backslidden because she abandoned the Lord; consequently, she was cast off, not to be taken in by Him again.

What to Take Away

Believers must be warned of the dangers of backsliding. Jeremiah gives several things to consider about this condition.

1. The major cause was *idolatry* (falling away from the true God to embrace false gods; 3:6).
2. Backsliding makes the people a very bad example (3:8).
3. Backsliding people tend to self-justification (3:11).
4. The penalty for backsliding is the judgment of God (3:12).
5. Backsliding does not prevent the fulfillment of God's sovereign purpose (3:14).
6. Genuine repentance will cause God to heal back-sliding (3:22).
7. Backsliding is connected to deceit and stubborn-ness (5:8).
8. Backsliding will be corrected in His people through Christ's virgin birth (31:2).
9. Backsliders tend to trust their wealth and power rather than the Lord (49:4).