

IF THOU WILT RETURN

TEXT: JEREMIAH 4:1-31

INTRODUCTION:

1. Jeremiah 4 is a continuation of Jeremiah's second recorded message, which began in chapter 3, verse 6.
2. The *Scofield Study Bible* calls it, "The second message to backslidden Judah."
3. They were terribly backslidden, and the LORD was telling them to return from their backsliding (3:7, 22; 4:1).
4. The key verse is Jeremiah 4:3. Hosea 10:12 says the same thing: "Break up your fallow ground."
5. The Israelites were a nation of farmers, and there are many references to farming in the Bible.
6. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting" (Galatians 6:7, 8).
7. In Matthew 13:3, our Lord said, "Behold, a sower went forth to sow." He went on to say that some seeds fell by the way side, some fell upon stony places, some fell among thorns, and other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit (Matt. 13:4-8).
8. In His explanation of the parable, our Lord said in Matthew 13:19 that the ground represents the heart of man.
9. That is why the prophets Jeremiah and Hosea say, "Break up your fallow ground" (Jer. 4:3; Hosea 10:12).
10. Fallow ground (Jer. 4:3) is hard ground. It is inactive and uncultivated. It is thorny ground.
11. When Jeremiah and Hosea say, "Break up your fallow ground," they are referring to the hard, stubborn heart of man.
12. The Lord says, "Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns" (Jer. 4:3).
13. Our churches are filled with thorns. A proud heart is a thorny heart. It is like ground untilled. A hard heart needs to be broken up by the Spirit of God. And only the Holy Spirit can do that.
14. Matthew Henry said a hard heart "is ground which may be improved...but it is fallow; it is over-grown with thorns and weeds, the natural product of the corrupt heart. Let us entreat the Lord to create in us a clean heart, and to renew a right spirit within us; for except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven."

15. I have preached from Jeremiah 4 before and I have a very simple outline for this chapter, one that is very easy to remember: repentance, regeneration, retribution.

I. REPENTANCE (4:1-3)

1. “The plowshare of conviction must overturn the hardened soil of the heart” (HA Ironside).
2. Sin must be dealt with (Jer. 4:1; cf. 3:13). Just like fallow ground must be broken up, sin must be rooted out of the heart.
3. The word “abominations” (Jer. 4:1) is a strong word. The word refers to the wicked things God hates – witchcraft, immorality, pride, idolatry, false religion, etc.
4. The Israelites were stealing, murdering, committing adultery, lying, and burning incense unto Baal and other heathen gods (Jer. 7:9). Then they would go into the temple and try and worship the true God of heaven. God calls this an abomination (Jer. 7:10; 4:1).
5. In fact, our Lord quoted Jeremiah 7:11 when He threw the moneylenders out of the temple (Matt. 21:13).
6. Sin must be thoroughly dealt with. Jeremiah 4:1 says, “Put away thine abominations out of my sight.”
7. Jeremiah 3:13 says, “Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the LORD thy God.”
8. God says, “Break up your fallow ground,” but the flesh shrinks from that. Repentance is painful at first but afterwards it produces a tremendous blessing.
9. True repentance means turning from sin from sin and turning to God. The apostle Paul wrote in I Thessalonians 1:9, “How ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”
10. Paul said in Acts 26:20, “That they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.”
11. The great revivalist Charles Finney said for Christians to break up the fallow ground they must repent of all known sins. He said they first must deal with their sins of omission, and then their sins of commission.
12. Sins of omission referred to by Finney include: ingratitude, coldness toward God, neglect of Bible reading, neglect of prayer, neglect of family duties, and neglect of self-denial.
13. Finney said, “They think they are doing a great deal for God, and doing about as much as He ought to ask in reason, if they are only doing what they can do about as well as not; but they are not willing to deny themselves any comfort or convenience whatever, for the sake of serving the Lord. They

will not willingly suffer reproach for the name of Christ. Nor will they deny themselves the luxuries of life, to save a world from hell.”

14. Other sins of omission referred to by Finney include skipping Sunday School and church services, unbelief, and no burden for the souls of men. Finney said, “You have stood by and seen them going right to hell, and it seems as though you did not care if they did.”
15. Finney also mentioned the lack of interest in missions.
16. Sins of commission referred to by Finney include: worldly-mindedness, pride, envy, a bitter spirit, slander, lying, cheating, hypocrisy, robbing God (not tithing), bad temper, and hindering others from serving God.

II. REGENERATION (4:4a).

1. It is sad but true: Many church members have never been born again.
2. The Jews thought they were saved on the basis of their circumcision. This sort of thinking carried over into the apostolic church. In Acts 15:1 we read, “And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.”
3. The apostle Paul dealt with this false teaching in his epistle to the Galatians.
4. God wanted them to circumcise their hearts (Jer. 4:4a; 9:26). This refers to regeneration, not ritual. But worldly, carnal religionists prefer ritual. The flesh likes ritual.
5. Ritualism likes holy days and traditions and liturgies and sacraments. This has replaced soulwinning, prayer, and strong Bible preaching in most churches. Even many Baptist churches have been corrupted.
6. God wanted their hearts circumcised (4:4). This meant radical change. They needed to be born again.
7. In Deuteronomy 10:16, the LORD told the Israelites, “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.”
8. “And be no more stiffnecked.” Stephen said to the stubborn Jews in Acts 7:51, “Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.”
9. Christians often wonder why some church members are so stiffnecked, so hard-hearted, so obstinate, so unteachable, and so stubborn. It could be that many of these stiffnecked church members were never saved in the first place.
10. In Romans 2:28, 29, the apostle Paul explains that circumcision – the circumcision necessary for salvation – was not “outward in the flesh.”
11. It is the inward circumcision of the heart that God requires (cf. Col. 2:11).

12. The circumcision of the flesh is physical and visible. It was a visible token of the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants, the Jews.
13. But the circumcision of the heart is spiritual and invisible.
14. Men like physical demonstrations of their religion – circumcision, baptism, confirmation, liturgy, bar mitzvah, high holy days, etc.
15. Ministers with colorful robes and pretentious titles, big candles, holy days and liturgies, and chanting and incense and pomp and ceremony.
16. But God is unimpressed with all of that ecclesiastical foolishness. In fact, in Isaiah 1:13 He calls it an abomination.
17. Religion without regeneration is an abomination. Please allow me to be blunt – the biggest racket in America today is not the gambling business; it is not the drug trade; it is not pornography; and it is not the alcohol business.
18. The biggest racket in America today is the religion racket and it is more wicked and more corrupt and more dangerous than drugs, alcohol, gambling, and pornography put together (cf. Jer. 14:14).
19. L. Ron Hubbard was an author who wrote weird science fiction books. He told people, "Writing for a penny a word is ridiculous. If a man really wanted to make a million dollars, the best way to do it would be start his own religion." So he started the Scientology cult, which is weirder and more devilish than the trashy books he wrote.
20. It is a fact that the flesh does not mind a little religion, but the flesh hates the circumcision of the heart.
21. Over 100 years ago, William Booth wrote these words: "In answer to your inquiry, I consider that the chief dangers which confront the coming century will be religion without the Holy Ghost, Christianity without Christ, forgiveness without repentance, salvation without regeneration, politics without God, and heaven without hell."
22. Jesus told Nicodemus, that very religious man, that great Pharisee, "Ye must be born again" (John 3:7).
23. God says, "Break up your fallow ground" (Jer. 4:3). But most of what passes for preaching today has no effect on the fallow ground – it is like a man digging with a broken shovel or a broken pickax.
24. Backslidden, carnal and unsaved people like this weak, anemic preaching because they do not have to change. No demands are put upon them.
25. They can continue on in their worldly ways, but God will not put up with it for long. This brings us to our last point.

III. RETRIBUTION (4:4)

1. Most of Jeremiah 4 deals with retribution. Jeremiah 4:4 says, “Lest my fury come forth like fire, and burn that none can quench it, because of the evil of your doings” (cf. 17:4b).
2. This is a warning of God's judgment upon backslidden Judah. Evil would come "from the north" (4:6; cf. 1:13), a reference to the invasion of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.
3. Verses 5 to 13 warn of the coming fall of Jerusalem by the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah uses three different pictures to describe the coming invasion:
 - "The lion is come up from his thicket, and the destroyer of the Gentiles is on his way; he is gone forth from his place to make thy land desolate; and thy cities shall be laid waste, without an inhabitant" (4:7).
 - "A dry wind" (4:11) and a "full wind" (4:12) shall come, bringing great destruction and discomfort. Jeremiah says, "Woe unto us! for we are spoiled" (4:13b).
 - Jeremiah 4:16 says, "watchers come from a far country" (Babylon), waiting for the right time to attack the cities of Judah.
4. There could only be one way to escape God's fierce judgment - “Wash thine heart from wickedness” (4:14).
5. This "washing" can only be done by receiving the Word of God, and obeying it, and allowing it to work in the conscience.
6. Our Lord said in John 15:3, "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you."
7. Ephesians 5:26 says the church has been sanctified and cleansed with the washing of water "by the word."
8. Since the people of Judah would not listen to Jeremiah, they would have to face the judgment of God (4:15-21).
9. The message upset Jeremiah and affected his health (4:19).
10. The people of Judah were determined to continue in their wickedness. They were “wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge” (vs. 22).
11. The coming judgment is graphically depicted (4:23 ff).
12. Regarding Jeremiah's frightening prophecies (e.g., 4:30, 31), H.A. Ironside said, "The language is doubtless highly poetical, yet fully to be relied on."

CONCLUSION:

1. J. Vernon McGee said America is in the same kind of position today as were the people of Judah in Jeremiah's day.

2. "The nation at that time had rejected God, but the people were still making a pretense of following Him. Such a people will find themselves rejected by God and by the world. America is following that same path. We are not loved by the world today. After World War II we were the pious people who were going to bring democracy to the world. What have we done? We have brought lawlessness into our own land. Do you think we should bring lawlessness into the trails of the jungle as we have into the streets of our cities? Is that the kind of civilization we are going to bring to people?"
3. "We find ourselves despised by other nations. God said it would be that way. No people can pretend to be God-fearing, be hypocritical about it, and still expect the world to look up to them. God has ordered it that way. I know it is not popular to say this -- Jeremiah wasn't very popular in his day either" (*Thru the Bible*).