

2. CALL TO REPENTANCE

JEREMIAH 3:1 – 4:4

Caught in the grip of sin

**¹If a man divorces his wife
and she goes from him
and becomes another man's wife,
will he return to her?
Would not she be defiled forever?
You have played the whore
with many lovers.
Do you think you can
return to me? says YHWH.
²Look up to the bare heights.
Where have you not been
lain with?
By the waysides you have sat
waiting for lovers,
like a nomad in the wilderness.
You have polluted the land
with the evil of your whoring.
³The showers were withheld,
and the spring rain
did not come;
yet you have maintained
the stubborn face of a whore,
you refuse to be ashamed.
⁴Have you not just now called
to me, "My Father, you are
the teacher of my youth –
⁵will his anger last for ever?,
will there be no let up?"
This is how you have spoken,
but you have done all the evil
that you could.**

Jeremiah returns to his initial image of married union (see 2:2). Deuteronomy legislates against the possibility of a husband reuniting with his wife once they are divorced and she has entered into a union with another man (see Deuteronomy 24:4). YHWH's people have forsaken him and gone off with other gods. How can they expect to be reunited?

Everywhere one looks there is evidence of the people's taking part in pagan cult. Just as the bedouin sit beside the road, waiting to do trade with passing caravans, so Israel is flaunting her charms to everyone passing by, touting for custom.

The irony is that the local Baalistic cult was meant to guarantee the crop. It is being blamed for the drought. The barrenness of the countryside, the failure of the rains, is a sign of YHWH's displeasure. The hard earth mirrors the stubborn, hard faces of the people, determined to carry on their prostitution. YHWH, the Holy One, cannot stay in a polluted land.

True, when things are hard, they called God 'Father' and they acknowledge that YHWH was their teacher in their youth. They hope that this will entice YHWH to have pity on them. However, words are not enough. Restoration requires a change of attitude and a change of behaviour and they show no signs of intending to change their behaviour or of heeding the instructions given them by their Teacher.

It is clear that left to themselves the people have no hope. They are in the grip of their sinful behaviour, and can see no way of changing even if they wanted to. If there is to be hope it will have to come from somewhere else.

What is surprising here is that the topic of returning is even mentioned, especially in light of the recalling of the Torah in verse 1. Does YHWH want them back? Is his commitment larger even than his will as expressed in the Torah? (compare Hosea 11:8-9).

The prose reflection in verses 6 to 11 reflects ideas found in Ezekiel 16:51-52. It appears to be created by exilic or post-exilic authors as a reflection on Jeremiah's words found in 3:1-5, and 3:12-13. The point being made is that Judah's behaviour is worse than that of the northern kingdom (compare Ezekiel 23:4-11). The northern kingdom collapsed in 721 with the destruction of Samaria. A hundred years later, when Jeremiah was ministering in Judah, there were no signs of a return of the northern exiles.

Jeremiah has just spoken of divorce and exile (3:1-5). The authors of 3:6-11 are reminding their contemporaries that Judah, instead of learning from the experience of the northern kingdom, was behaving in the same wayward manner. All talk of repentance was just that – talk. It was all a pretence.

Judah was therefore more guilty than the northern kingdom, for they had the example of what happened in the north, but they took no notice. No wonder Jerusalem was destroyed and the inhabitants of Judah were dragged into exile!

Verses 12-13 seem to belong with verses 1-5. Jeremiah is telling his contemporaries in Judah that, while there seems no hope of any change on their part, there are grounds for hope because YHWH is faithful (*ḥāsīd*) even if Judah is not. YHWH wants faithless Israel back.

The implication is that if there is still hope for the northern kingdom, there is still hope for Judah. But they must 'acknowledge their guilt' and 'return'. They must 'obey YHWH's voice'.

Verses 1-5 gave no prospect of hope. Verses 12-13 open up the possibility of life, not because of what Judah is, but because YHWH, the faithful husband, wants them back.

6YHWH said to me in the days of King Josiah: Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and played the whore there?

7And I thought, "After she has done all this she will return to me"; but she did not return, and her false sister Judah saw it. 8She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce; yet her false sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore.

9Because she took her whoredom so lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree.

10Yet for all this her false sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but only in pretense, says YHWH.

11Then YHWH said to me: Faithless Israel has shown herself less guilty than false Judah.

12Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: Return, faithless Israel, says YHWH.

I will not look on you in anger, for I am faithful, says YHWH; I will not be angry forever.

13Only acknowledge your guilt, that you have rebelled against YHWH your God, and scattered your favours among strangers under every green tree, and have not obeyed my voice, says YHWH.

¹⁴Return, O faithless children, says YHWH, for I am your master; I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion.

¹⁵I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.

¹⁶And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says YHWH, they shall no longer say, "The ark of the covenant of YHWH." It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made.

¹⁷At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of YHWH, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of YHWH in Jerusalem, and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will.

¹⁸In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your ancestors for a heritage.

This passage seems to be post-exilic. Verse 14 speaks of return to YHWH (repentance) and also of return from exile. Not all the exiles chose to return. The authors see the decision to return as a response to YHWH's special choice. This is the first of 17 times when Jerusalem is called 'Zion' - a term used not for the physical city, but for the city as the place of the temple and of the Davidic dynasty. It can be used as a metaphor for the people of God.

All schools interpreted the exile as a punishment for infidelity, especially on the part of the leaders. Here, in post-exilic Judah, the authors are confident that YHWH will raise up true leaders (shepherds; compare Ezekiel 34). This will mean that YHWH's blessing will be with his people who will 'multiply and increase'.

We are not sure when the Ark of the Covenant (YHWH's throne) disappeared from the inner sanctuary of the temple. What we do know is that it was never part of the second, post-exilic, temple. Some may have thought of this as a problem. The authors are assuring them that the Ark is no longer significant. Jerusalem is God's throne (verse 17).

Verse 17 has parallels in Isaiah 2:1-4 (= Micah 4:1-3). It includes an exhortation that the post-exilic community in Judah will not carry on the stubborn behaviour of their ancestors that brought about the destruction of the city and the subsequent exile. Furthermore it holds out the promise that Judah will at last carry out its mission faithfully, and that 'all the nations shall gather to Jerusalem'.

Verse 18 ties together 3:6-13 (concerning the northern tribes) and 3:14-17 (concerning the return of the exiles to Judah). It appears to be a late eschatological addition, looking forward to the fulfilment of YHWH's promise when the peoples of both north and south will be one people, enjoying possession of the Promised Land

In verse 19 Jeremiah offers an insight into YHWH's heart (compare Hosea 11:1-9). When the gods selected the nations to which they would act as patrons, YHWH chose Israel as his own (compare Deuteronomy 32:8-9). He hoped they would look to him as a father and 'never forsake' him.

However that was not to be. Israel has been persistently unfaithful and disloyal, indulging in one affair after another.

The wailing heard on the heights is the wailing of God, expressed in verse 22. In spite of their faithlessness YHWH is calling them back, wanting to heal them.

In verses 22-23 Jeremiah suggests the proper response of the community if the people would come to their senses: to recognise the futility of the pagan cult, to admit that their salvation (the only time the word occurs in Jeremiah) is to be found in YHWH (not the Baals), and to return to the God who has chosen them as his own.

It is not clear from verses 24-25 that the people take up the challenge. They admit they have sinned, but they seem unable to rise above their shame. They seem to want to obliterate it all (to 'sleep it off'), hoping that when they wake up their shame will no longer stare them in the face.

**¹⁹I thought, How I want to set you
among my children,
and give you a pleasant land,
the most beautiful heritage
of all the nations.**

**I thought you would call me,
My Father,
and would never forsake me.**

**²⁰Instead, as a woman deceives her
husband to go with her lover,
so you have been faithless to me
O house of Israel, says YHWH.**

**²¹A sound on the bare heights is heard,
wailing for Israel's children,
because they have perverted
their way,
they have forgotten YHWH
their God:**

**²²Return, O faithless children,
I will heal your faithlessness.**

**"Here we come to you;
for you are YHWH our God.**

**²³Truly the hills are a delusion,
the orgies on the mountains.
Truly in YHWH our God
is the salvation of Israel.**

**²⁴But from our youth Shame
has devoured all for which
our ancestors had laboured:
their flocks and their herds,
their sons and their daughters.**

**²⁵Let us lie down in our shame,
and let our dishonour cover us;
for we have sinned against YHWH
our God, we and our ancestors,
from our youth even to this day;
and we have not obeyed the voice of
YHWH our God."**

Repent

**¹If you repent, O Israel,
says YHWH,
you may return to me.
If you remove your idols
from my presence,
and do not waver,
²and if when you swear,
"As YHWH lives!"
you do so in truth, in justice,
and in uprightness,
the name "Israel" will
signify blessing
and renown for the nations.**

**³Thus says YHWH to the people
of Judah and Jerusalem:
Break up your fallow ground,
and do not sow among thorns.
⁴Circumcise yourselves
to YHWH,
remove the foreskin
of your hearts,
O people of Judah and
inhabitants of Jerusalem;
or else my wrath will go forth
like fire,
and burn with no one
to quench it,
because of your evil-doing.**

This is YHWH's fourth appeal for Israel to return. Though Israel is unfaithful, YHWH will never be. If Israel repents, YHWH will welcome them back. The second commandment insists: 'You shall not take the name of YHWH in vain.' If they are going to call on YHWH it cannot be just external mouthing. They must do so 'in truth, in justice, and in uprightness.' In other words, their lives must demonstrate their sincerity. YHWH requires this for he wants his people to experience fullness of life through fidelity to the covenant.

It is possible that verse 2 is referring to the blessing that YHWH intends for the nations through the mediation of Israel (compare Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4). More probably, Jeremiah is saying that, if Israel returns to YHWH, the whole world will look to Israel and Israel will stand out as an example of true blessedness.

Just as they prepare for sowing by ploughing the field (and so removing weeds), so they must cut deep into their hearts to prepare to receive YHWH (compare Hosea 10:12). Circumcision (verse 4; see Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6) seems to have become important as an identifying sign only at the time of the exile, when the people of Judah were deprived of other identifying signs (king, temple, cult). It set them apart from the Babylonians in whose land they were exiled.

As a religious sign it is clearly related to the handing on of life, and so to the 'blessing'. It became a sign of the trust that God would, indeed, ensure a great offspring to Israel. In the very act of sexual intercourse, man and woman are reminded that the life offered and received is filled with promise.

Jeremiah is insisting that for circumcision to be truly meaningful and effective it must affect their heart. If there is not a deep, inner change of heart, YHWH's smouldering anger will burst into an all-consuming fire, and there will be no escaping from the effects of their behaviour (compare Isaiah 1:31).