

Jeremiah 3 — What's on Offer for Jewish People Today?

*Originally presented as part of Bob Mendelsohn's 52-part teaching series on Jeremiah in 2021.
References in the video to contemporary events or gatherings reflect the time of the original recording.*

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Introduction

In Jeremiah 2 we saw ten specific images of failure applied to our people. Now some major themes arise again, and some appear for the first time in this prophetic book. We see harlotry decried, and we hear the aching, the longing of the Almighty for his people. We also hear about the family relationship between Israel in the north and Judah in the south, and especially the way one sister observes and then copies the behaviour of the other.

But this chapter is not only about what Israel and Judah have done. It is also about what God offers. Jeremiah will show us that repentance, forgiveness, restoration, leadership and relationship with God are still on offer. Let's jump into it.

A Call to Repentance — Verses 1–5

As is typical of the prophets in the Bible, after a listing of the sins of the people, the prophet calls for a turnaround—a 180-degree turn placed in the path of the people. So today we are not disappointed. That's just what we see.

The context of verse 1 is Torah, specifically Deuteronomy 24:1–4. Moses described the situation in which a man divorces his wife, she subsequently becomes another man's wife, and that second marriage also ends. The first husband is not permitted simply to take her back again as his wife.

What was Moses's point? I believe the commandment was given to remind us that we should not be cavalier about marriage. Imagine someone committed to his partner who divorces her for a weekend or a year away, for whatever adventure purposes, then returns to his original partner. This “plus-one” hiatus, where the man finds himself a loaner wife, is exactly the sort of behaviour Moses is trying to prevent.

But why bring that commandment to mind? There are so many commandments in Torah that Jeremiah could have cited. What's his point?

In context, Israel has run away from God and hooked up with Assyrians and Egyptians. With the idolatry and adultery Jeremiah has announced, the people have abandoned the Lord who married them. We are his people; we are his bride. And when we divorce ourselves from God, will he be allowed to marry us again? The Deuteronomy passage connects this kind of marital behaviour with defilement of the land. So it looks hopeless.

Moses would seem to say no, but God is playing the God card. He is not bound by human motivations and human limitations. There is something of Hosea in view here. God is doing something that demonstrates that his mercy reaches beyond what we might expect.

Matthew Henry observed that genuine repentance requires people to remember their sins honestly and return to God, while God's reception of penitents demonstrates that he deals with them as God rather than merely as humans might deal with one another. His mercy gives the returning sinner reason for hope: God does not retain his anger forever, and he welcomes those who genuinely return to him.¹ I'm so grateful for God's offer and that he does not keep his anger forever. Repentance is on offer.

The reference to the Arab in verse 2 is to the marauding Bedouin who might lie in wait by the side of the road to plunder passersby. Think of pirates waiting for a vulnerable vessel. The Jewish people were not merely going after foreign gods and foreign ways of thinking; the peoples and temptations around them were also pursuing them.

And friends, that's the way it is for us as well. Stand still and you start going backwards. Unless you advance, unless you take God seriously, unless you keep walking with him in daily meditation and prayer, you will slip; you will decay. Why? Because the world, the flesh and the devil are ever advancing and attacking. Remember Peter taught us that the devil is roaring, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). Walking with the Lord is the way to win. Surrender to him each morning and evening. Pray with others. Listen to biblical teaching, read godly literature, and grow in relationships with others in your believing community.

You might wonder about the reference to dry land and unfruitfulness. Is that part of the curse? Perhaps, but I see this as God bringing evidence to Israel that even though they had gone after the gods of the idol-worshippers under the promise of bounty, those gods had failed. All the promises that tell us we can simply believe ourselves into health, wealth, success or whatever else we desire are offering another version of the same old idolatry. Israel was promised that if they followed the pagan gods and pagan ways, their land would be full of crops. God says, in effect, "The evidence is in. Your new gods failed you."

Judah Is Worse Than Israel — Verses 6–11

In verse 6, God asks Jeremiah to evaluate the situation. What we have just unpacked actually sounds as though God is disappointed. Jeremiah is invited to consider what happened and conclude that Israel should have turned back to God.

¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, commentary on Jeremiah 3.

There is an adjective in verse 6 that might be translated differently from one Bible to another. It's the Hebrew word *meshuvah*, sometimes rendered "faithless" and sometimes "backsliding." Its root is *shuv*, meaning to return or turn. But here the returning is in the wrong direction: back to darkness, evil and sin.

There is another adjective used of Judah, the little sister in this chapter: "treacherous." The Hebrew uses the three-letter root *bagad*, which is also related to a word for clothing. Throughout Genesis especially, clothing is often associated with deception and treachery. Consider Jacob and his father. Consider Joseph's brothers and their deception involving his coat. Treachery and clothing were connected again when Joseph, now a servant in Egypt, was sexually pursued by Potiphar's wife. Tamar also appears in a story in which clothing communicates identity, widowhood and deception. Repeatedly, garments and treachery appear together.

But let's go beyond the word for clothing. Judah is the younger sister in this text, the southern section of the Promised Land. She should have observed what happened to Israel and understood the lesson. Her takeaway should have been to return to God, to draw near to him, to stop pursuing false gods and to live for him. That's the takeaway Jeremiah wanted for her. That's the takeaway God wanted for her.

And for us. When we see leaders fall, when we see ministries or congregations wander from truth, what is our takeaway? Do we draw closer to God, or do we imagine that somehow, we can get away with the same things? What do the mistakes of others teach us? I urge you: learn from them. Don't go down the wrong path. No one wins if you do.

Wisdom was on offer for Judah, but she turned aside. We don't need to learn everything by making our own mistakes.

Forgiveness Is Available — Verses 12–20

Verse 12 introduces the call of God with clarity, once again to the Jewish people—this time to the northerners. God assigns Jeremiah the task of calling Israel to repent. Again he calls them *meshuvah*, faithless. Then he says, "I will not look upon you in anger."

The Hebrew is from *nafal*, meaning to fall. God says, in effect, my face will not fall upon you. Have you ever imagined the power of God, and especially the angry power of God, falling on people? He doesn't merely turn his back; he could pounce, catch and capture. But here God says, No, that's not what I'm going to do.

Then comes the reason: *ki chasid ani*. I am gracious. I am full of kindness. You forgot who I was and am. I want you to walk with me, to know me, to get to know me. One day at a time. Fall in love with me. I'm on your side because I want you on my side.

Verse 13 says, "Only acknowledge your iniquity." First, know your sin. Get it. Accept what you have done. Learn how far you are from God. And with a longing to be with him, begin moving towards him.

Imagine being a youngster at the Summer Olympics and your hero is a hurdler. You are shorter than each hurdle, and you look along the track and see an obstacle you cannot even imagine overcoming. You are mesmerized by it. The goals you might set are too high and too far away. You cannot even see the finish line, but you can certainly see the problem—the hurdle.

Keep your eyes there for a moment. THEN look at the one who overcomes those hurdles. The hurdler is the one you must connect with. He wins. He wants you to win. Attach yourself to him and acknowledge the impossibility of winning on your own.

John taught us, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). I will forgive you, God says, and in verse 15, I will give you shepherds after my own heart. Your leaders were leading you incorrectly. Now God is going to offer a swap and bring in his own people, leaders who will feed the people with knowledge and understanding.

Then comes another promise. When the people are settled in the land again, they won’t be looking to the past for strength and guidance. They will no longer be saying, “The ark of the covenant of the LORD.” They will not remember it or miss it or make another one. God’s new government will overwhelm the religious and political structures that preceded it.

Verse 17 says that Jerusalem will be called “The Throne of the LORD,” and all the nations will gather there to honour the name of the Lord. Judah and Israel will be reunited. The people will return to the land God gave their fathers. Buckle your seatbelt; there’s much more to come.

Then God says, in effect, you will be beautiful, and I am going to ask you to call me Father again. You did before, but it was presumption. Now we will have a relationship that makes sense. No more treachery. No more idolatry. No more adultery.

Forgiveness is on offer!

Jewish People Express Repentance — Verses 21–25

The final section begins in verse 21. Israel begins to turn. We realize our error. We confess our sins. God has already said what he will do, but he gives one more call in verse 22: “Return, O faithless sons.” You are *mishpochah*. You belong in the house, not out in the shed. You should come and eat the fattened calf, not sit in the pigpen and dine with the pigs.

What does Israel do? They repent. I can almost hear the music at the end of the movie, and it’s uplifting. They tell God they are his:

“Behold, we come to You; For You are the LORD our God.”

Then they acknowledge that the hills and mountains where they pursued their false worship have deceived them. Salvation is not there.

“Surely in the LORD our God is the salvation of Israel.”

Finally comes the confession. Their shame has consumed the fruit of their fathers' labour, their flocks and herds, their sons and daughters. They acknowledge that they and their fathers have sinned against the Lord from their youth until that very day and have not obeyed his voice.

They owned their sin. They owned their wrongs. AND they owned their God.

What a great lesson in humility and listening. Admit your wrong. Cry out to God for forgiveness, and he is willing AND able to make that happen.

What Are We Learning? (Key Takeaways)

Jeremiah 3 begins with what appears to be an impossible situation. The relationship is broken. Israel has been unfaithful. Judah has watched Israel's failure and then done even worse. Yet God continues to call his people back.

That rhythm is going to matter as we continue through Jeremiah: brokenness and offer. Sin is exposed, but God calls. Judgment is deserved, but mercy is offered. The people wander, and God says, "Return."

Wisdom was available to Judah if she would learn from Israel's mistakes. Forgiveness was available to Israel if she would acknowledge her sin. And relationship with God was still available because God himself remained gracious.

What is God saying to you through all this? What will you do with this information today?

Conclusion and Invitation

God is calling each of us to know him and to walk with him, today and throughout our days. Have you received Yeshua as your Messiah and Lord? Have you renounced your sin, your idolatry, your forsaking God and given him first place in your life? If not, please do so now. Use your own words, if you want, but yield, surrender, to the Lord of life.

The Lord calls. He knows. He forgives. He blesses and builds us up.

What's Next? (Jeremiah 4)

At the end of Jeremiah 3, everything sounds wonderfully hopeful. God says, "Return, O faithless sons," and Israel answers, "Behold, we come to You; for You are the LORD our God." They acknowledge their sin. They acknowledge their God. It sounds like Jeremiah has succeeded.

Unfortunately, what sounds like repentance is still aspirational.

In Jeremiah 4, God again says, "Return." The Hebrew word *shuv* becomes central: Israel has turned away from God, and God calls the people to turn back to him. But this is more than making one 180-degree turn. God wants his people to turn towards him and then keep walking with him. Attention leads to affection.

In *Jeremiah 4: Turn Back People!*, the warnings become increasingly urgent. Judgment is coming, Jeremiah himself begins to feel the anguish of what he sees, and we discover something important about the man known as the weeping prophet: underneath his forthright public message is a man who genuinely aches for the people to whom he preaches.

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