

Jeremiah 4 — Turn Back People!

*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.*

WATCH

Jeremiah 4 — Turn Back People! [Embed original YouTube video]

READ

Introduction

Last chapter ended with what appeared to be repentance. Listen to chapter 3, verse 22. God says, “Return, O faithless ones, I will heal your faithlessness.” Then immediately it sounds as though the action God expected is fulfilled. In the same verse, the people of Israel say, “Behold, we come to You; for You are the LORD our God.” And again in verse 25, “We have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even to this day. And we have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God.”

That sounds like Jeremiah was successful in convincing the Jewish people to make amends, to hook up with the Eternal One and live righteously. Unfortunately, that was aspirational only. As we read today, God’s anger piles up and the warnings seem unheeded.

Get It Right: Turn to Me! — Verses 1–4

Verse 1 has that play on words we began to see last chapter. Remember the word for faithless was *meshuvah*. *Shuv* is the Hebrew word for “return” or “turn,” and some versions of the Bible call Israel “backsliding.” That’s a good way to demonstrate the failure God is correcting. We had turned away from God, and he was calling us to return to God. Isaiah said the same thing 100 years earlier: “Turn to Me and be saved!” (Isaiah 45:22). It’s almost a spinning, twirling dance move, isn’t it? We either turn towards God, or we turn away from God.

But it’s not really the turn, is it? It’s the focus of our eyes which causes us to turn to or away from anything. Consider this. You are walking down the street in a quiet neighbourhood. Suddenly, a loud crash sounds behind you. You turn. Not for the sake of turning, but for the sake of seeing. What just happened? Is anyone hurt? Are you needed to ring the emergency number or assist immediately? All these questions are answered by your observation, and that’s assisted by your turning.

Advertisers on television and in the movies, all want us to notice the items or experiences they are selling. They use all kinds of devices to get us to look. That may involve a loud cymbal and our turning our heads, or just the slightest motion of our eyes from one side to the other to see the splash of the waterfall or the squeezing of the lemon over the John Dory on the platter.

Advertisers know that if they get us to look, they are more likely to secure our affection. Attention leads to affection.

When my wife and I were leaving New York City in 1998 to move to Sydney, the removalists had taken everything from our unit on a Friday, and we were scheduled to fly out a couple of days later. We had what we needed for the flights, and that was all we had. That Sunday we went to Grace Church in Greenwich Village and walked back to our residence. On the way home we saw a street fair, one of those ubiquitous summer fetes when almost every block is closed for hours to allow vendors to sell the same watches, crafts, jams and assorted whatnot to the throngs.

We found our way through one, and I found myself walking down the centre. It was as if there were an aisle. The things on the sides were irrelevant to me. I had no room in any suitcase. I didn't need anything else; all our bags were packed, and we were ready to go. I wondered if this were what John Bunyan had in mind when he published *Pilgrim's Progress* in 1678. There Vanity Fair was in view, the scene of amusement and vanity, of idle waste-of-time and frivolity.

I literally walked through and felt smug, which is one of my character defects and not the reason for my telling you this. I'm telling you this so that you feel the feeling I had of conquest, of not turning to the right or to the left. I didn't have a need; I didn't have any room; I was not lured. I did not turn. I had my face set like flint to go forward. That's the place God wants for us. Walk to him; walk with him. Do not be lured by the world and its dainties.

But the way that works requires an initial turning.

If I'm living away from God and his plans; if I'm behaving towards outsiders in a wrong manner, in the three-fold sins of adultery, idolatry and murder; if I'm desiring approval and praise from others, then I must turn away from all that to find God. It's as if you are approaching a cliff in a car that's going too fast, and there is a policeman, a mayor, a grandmother and a big yellow and black sign all saying, "Stop, turn around, and go the right way." You finally see the danger, believe the notifications and hit the brakes. You catch your breath, put the car in reverse, make a three-point turn and head the opposite direction. You have turned. And that's what God wants in verse 1.

The reason I tell you the story of Vanity Fair in New York City in 1998 is to help you with the ongoing desire of the Almighty. Yes, he wants you to stop going in the wrong direction and turn to him. And THEN he wants you to keep walking with him. Starting is good; finishing is better.

The Hebrew says: אָם-תָּשׁוּב יִשְׂרָאֵל נָאִם-יְהוָה אֵלַי תָּשׁוּב

(*Eem tashuv Yisrael, n'oom Adonai, AyLai tashuv.*) If you are returning, then to me you should return. It's not to a religion. It's not to Moses or Joshua, to the rebbe or to Jeremiah. It's to the Living God. Get on the path towards God and then keep going!

The heathen used to cry "Baal lives" in their worship ceremonies. No wonder Jeremiah says in verse 2, "You will swear, 'As the LORD lives,' in truth, in justice and in righteousness."

Chai Adonai! The Lord lives. No matter what else is going on in your life, whatever else the world is saying—in all your circumstances, in your neighbourhood, in your relationships, in your work, in your failures, in your successes—in all these things, THE LORD LIVES.

Verse 2 tells me that God lives in truth, in justice and in right living. If Israel gets this right, look at the results. All the goyim will be blessed in him! Not in us, not in relationship to the Jewish people, but to God himself. Not in relationship to Torah, but to the Lord of life. And in him they will glory. That's the goal for Israel, to help the nations get it right.

Verse 3 introduces yet another image: fallow ground. Albert Barnes explains the picture as a farmer who does not simply scatter seed onto neglected, thorn-filled soil. The ground first must be broken up and prepared. In the same way, repentance is serious work. The things that prevent good growth must be disturbed and removed before good seed can flourish.¹

Look at the other imagery which again abounds in today's chapter. Work on the fields and disrupt what is and look at the heart and cut things off which don't represent. In verse 4 they are evil deeds. God says to cut them off like foreskins in circumcision. These are pictures of disruption and cleansing. Removing and moving on.

God's Judgment Is Coming — Verses 5–28

From verse 5 onwards, the chapter turns to evidence of judgment coming to Judah. But as all good prophets before and after him, Jeremiah starts with action verbs for Judah:

Blow a trumpet. Cry aloud. Assemble yourselves. Lift up a standard. Seek refuge.

If Judah will do these things, the warnings will be heard and Judah will repent and Judah will be spared. The nations up north are gathering; you are in trouble.

So here's the recipe for success:

Put on sackcloth. Weep and wail. More trouble is coming, so turn to verse 14 and see another instruction: Wash your heart from evil. And yet.

That's one of the phrases I don't see in the text, but I hear Jeremiah whispering it. The people are aware of the truth and the consequences, and yet. They choose to dismiss the warnings. They choose to go their own way.

Verse 31 ends with the statement, "The cry of the daughter of Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands, saying, 'Ah, woe is me, for I faint before murderers.'"

And yet.

Matthew Henry observes that although everything has been thrown out of order by sin and judgment, the ruin of the Jewish nation will not ultimately be final. God's severe correction of his

people does not mean that he has completely cast them off.² There it is again: judgment is real, but destruction is not the final word.

Warren Wiersbe points out that the warning trumpet gave the people an opportunity to flee to safety, repent in sackcloth and wash their hearts by confessing their sins. The approaching Babylonian army would come quickly and thoroughly, but the warning itself was evidence that there was still an opportunity to respond.³

Look at verse 18: “Your ways and your deeds have brought these things to you. This is your evil. How bitter! How it has touched your heart!”

That’s when Jeremiah shakes his head again. Listen to verse 19 and following: “My soul, my soul! I am in anguish! Oh, my heart! My heart is pounding in me; I cannot be silent, because you have heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war; disaster on disaster is proclaimed.”

The word translated “soul” here is not the usual Hebrew word for soul. It’s *me’eh*, referring to the inward parts or internal organs. It’s related to the word used of the inward parts of the fish in which Jonah spent three days: יִהְיֶה יוֹנָה בְּמִעֵי הָדָךְ

Jeremiah is feeling this in his gut.

I don’t know any other prophet who spoke in such openness about his own feelings considering Israel’s failure. That is, I didn’t until I thought of Yeshua himself, who similarly saw the evil in the Jewish people, the failures and the disappointments, and felt their pain.

Yeshua lamented over Jerusalem: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!” He longed to gather her children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but they were unwilling (Matthew 23:37).

Pain for another is the key to understanding Jeremiah, the weeping prophet. His public stance might have been forthright and almost like a rugby front rower, but in private he was a broken and sad man, wishing to take the place of those to whom he preached for 40 years.

Verse 20 says, “disaster on disaster.” We might say disaster on steroids. One catastrophe is bad enough; now imagine another piled on top of it. Tents, landmarks, things we can count on—all gone. That’s the feeling Jeremiah is experiencing. The devastation is not theoretical to him. He feels the coming destruction personally.

Verse 22 says we should be as clever in honouring God as we are in finding ways around him: “For My people are foolish, they don’t know Me; they are stupid children and have no understanding. They are shrewd to do evil, but to do good they do not know.”

What’s he saying? What’s the bottom line? What’s the way to be wise?

TO KNOW GOD!

All our wisdom and knowledge is information; what God wants is for us to be in relationship with him. But what does Jeremiah see instead? Verse 23: judgment as if we were back to square one. Creation. Formless and void. Darkness. Empty. Pre-creation. The language recalls Genesis 1, but everything is moving in the wrong direction. Instead of order emerging from chaos, Jeremiah sees the land collapsing back towards chaos.

Verse 28 says God will not *nacham*. He will not relent, repent or comfort. He is not about to change his mind. Then Jeremiah uses the *shuv* word again: God will not turn back from what he has declared. Judah must turn.

If you want renewal and good life, turn and face God. Turn and repent, change your mind, and you will find comfort.

The Language of Prostitution — Verses 29–31

The chapter closes with one more disturbing image. Normally, when people in an undefended city hear that an overwhelmingly powerful army is approaching, they flee. They head for the hills or seek whatever shelter they can find. They know they cannot defeat the enemy, so getting out of the way is simply realistic.

But Jeremiah portrays Jerusalem doing almost the opposite. Rather than recognizing the danger and fleeing, she dresses herself as a prostitute trying to attract lovers. She puts on scarlet, gold ornaments and eye makeup, attempting to make herself attractive to the very foreign powers she hopes will rescue her. But those hoped-for lovers have become her enemies. The alliances in which Jerusalem placed her confidence cannot save her.⁴

Jerusalem has exchanged her true beauty for a courtesan's costume and still does not understand her condition. Matthew Henry's conclusion is sobering: sin eventually catches up with the sinner, and sorrow eventually catches up with those who imagine themselves secure.⁵

Let's ponder our role today in association with our friends and neighbours, with our Jewish community and our family. And importantly, what will you do today with Yeshua, the veritable weeping prophet who cares about us, who longs for us to know the Father, who died to make that available to us?

What Are We Learning? (Key Takeaways)

Jeremiah 4 begins with a simple command: Turn. But biblical repentance is more than changing direction for a moment. God says, in effect, "If you're returning, return to me." We turn away from sin to turn towards someone—the Living God—and then we keep walking with him.

Attention leads to affection. The tragedy of this chapter is that Judah hears warning after warning and yet refuses to turn. The trumpet sounds. The people are told to assemble, seek refuge, mourn and wash their hearts. God gives them opportunities to respond, and yet they continue along the same path.

And Jeremiah does not stand at a safe distance from them. He aches for them. He feels the coming disaster in his inward parts. The weeping prophet isn't called that simply because he announces terrible things. He grieves because the people he loves refuse the God who continues to call them.

Again we see the rhythm: brokenness and offer. Judgment is coming, but God is still calling. Turn.

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 warns. He forgives. He blesses and builds us up.

What's Next? (Jeremiah 5)

Jeremiah 4 has repeatedly called the people to turn back to God. But if they refuse to listen to him, an obvious question follows: To whom are they listening? Whom do they trust?

Jeremiah 5 opens with an extraordinary challenge. Search the streets of Jerusalem. Look through the squares. Find just one person who does justice and seeks truth, and God says he will pardon the city. People may even use the right religious language—"As the LORD lives"—while their lives reveal that their words are false.

As the chapter unfolds, Jeremiah identifies people who reject the Lord, people who receive God's goodness without gratitude, people who trust false prophets rather than God, and finally people who have become comfortable with the whole arrangement. The prophets prophesy falsely, the priests rule on their own authority—and then comes perhaps the most disturbing statement of all:

"My people love it so!" In *Jeremiah 5: Whom Do You Trust?*, we'll look at what happens when people don't merely believe something false, but actually come to prefer it.

Endnotes

¹ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament*, commentary on Jeremiah 4:3.

² Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, commentary on Jeremiah 4.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Decisive* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1991), discussion of Jeremiah 4.

⁴ Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley and Joel F. Drinkard Jr., *Jeremiah 1–25*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 26 (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), discussion of Jeremiah 4:29–31.

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, commentary on Jeremiah 4.

Bibliography

Barnes, Albert. *Notes on the Old Testament*. Commentary on Jeremiah.

Craigie, Peter C.; Kelley, Page H.; Drinkard, Joel F. *Jeremiah 1–25*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 26. Dallas: Word Books, 1991.

Henry, Matthew. *Commentary on the Whole Bible*.

Wiersbe, Warren W. *Be Decisive*. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1991.