

Dr. Gary Yates, Jeremiah, Lecture 10, Jeremiah 3, Call To Repentance, Shub

© 2024 Gary Yates and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his course on the book of Jeremiah. This is session number 10, Jeremiah 3.1-4.4, The Call to Repentance, Shub.

The title for our session today is The Call to Return in Jeremiah 3.1 to 4.4, the next unit in the book.

In our previous section, we looked at the trial speech and the disputation speech, in which the Lord uses Jeremiah as the prosecuting attorney. He brings the people into the courtroom and convinces them of their guilt.

So, we come to the end of chapter two, and the verdict is that Judah is guilty of adultery. They've been unfaithful to the Lord. Remember, that was a capital offense in ancient Israel and Judah.

And so, this is a serious situation. We would think that in light of that, the only thing that's left is to pronounce sentence. But as we see at the end of the last session, God, as the judge, often after these courtroom scenes, is willing to bring the people back to his chambers and to negotiate with them and allow them to have the opportunity to repent, to change their ways, and to avoid judgment.

We saw that in Isaiah chapter 1. The Lord's reared and raised rebellious children. They deserve to die. That's a capital offense in the book of Deuteronomy.

But come now, let us reason together. And though you are guilty, you're stained with the blood of your own crimes, and the Lord is willing to allow you to live. In the book of Micah, the courtroom scene, what does the Lord require of his people? Israel is given the opportunity to repent and to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before our God.

One of the other prophetic genres that we see in the scriptures that are very common is not just the judgment speech, but we also have what are called the calls to repentance. And in chapter 3 and the early part of chapter 4 in Jeremiah, that's exactly what we have. We have a call to repentance.

In this particular genre, what happens is that the prophet is specifically appealing for them to change their ways. And a call for repentance is going to include two things. It will include the appeal to change, but then there will also be motivations that are offered as to why that change should happen.

Sometimes the motivations are positive. If you change your ways, if you do what the Lord will ask you to do, then the Lord will bless you in these specific ways. If you do not change your ways, then these are the punishments and the consequences that the Lord will bring against you.

The goal of the preaching of the prophets was not just to announce that God's judgment was coming. If that was the Lord's sole purpose, he would simply send the judgment. But the prophet Amos says that the Lord does not bring calamity on the city without first warning the people through a prophet.

And so ultimately, really, what's behind all of the preaching of the prophets in some sense is an appeal for the people to change their ways. Jeremiah chapter 3, verse 1 to chapter 4, verse 4 is our next unit. It is a call to repentance.

That's how we would label its literary form. I thought we might take a minute before we look at that passage and note a call to repentance in another prophet, the prophet Amos, who was in some ways a precursor to Jeremiah and was one of the prophets to the northern kingdom of Israel during the Assyrian crisis. In Amos chapter 5, verses 4 and 5, and several other verses here, we see a clear call to repentance.

Here's what the Lord says. Verse 4: seek me and live, but do not seek Bethel and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba, for Gilgal shall surely go into exile and Bethel shall come to nothing. So, the Lord says, seek me and live, and do not seek the sanctuaries like Bethel or Gilgal or Beersheba because you're just going to go there and do your rituals.

God's not going to respond to that. Seek me and the positive motivation, you will be allowed to live. When Moses had given the lot of the people at the very beginning, choose for yourself between life and death, in a sense the prophet is putting exactly that same choice in front of the people.

It goes on to say again another appeal in verse 6, seek the Lord and live. There's the positive motivation, choose for yourself life or death. Now here's the warning, lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph and it devour with none to quench it for Bethel.

So you can either choose to seek the Lord and live, or God's going to break out like a fire and consume the people. There's a positive and negative motivation there. In verse 14, seek good and not evil, again the motivation that you may live and then further the promise so that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you as you have said.

Verse 15, hate evil and love good, establish justice in the gate. Change your ways and the practices of injustice. It may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

The prophet says there's always the possibility that if we change our ways, God may avoid and relent from sending the judgment, and we will be allowed to live. The chapter goes on in verses 21 to 24, the Lord says, I hate, and I despise your feast, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them.

Take away from me the noise of your songs to the melody of your harps, I will not listen. Alright, the prophet is not opposed to the rituals, what the prophet is opposed to is the rituals without the lifestyle. And so he says, get rid of all this external stuff that you're doing for me and let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

There's a call to repentance there. Get rid of the empty ritual and instead do the things that God has commanded you. And if you do that, there's always the possibility that you will live.

That passage again in Isaiah, come now let us reason together, says the Lord. If they will change their ways, the Lord will remove the bloodstains. It's not just a guarantee I'm going to forgive you no matter what.

If you change your ways, I will graciously forgive you. It says that if you do what God says, you will be allowed to eat and enjoy the good of the land. The Hebrew verb to eat is a call.

You'll enjoy the blessings of the promised land. But if you do not repent, if you do not stop the sinful ways that the Lord has indicted you for, then you will be consumed by the sword. And the word there for consumed is a call.

So, the choice in front of them is you can either eat or be eaten. And if you obey God, you will eat and enjoy the blessings of the land. If you do not obey God, you yourselves will be eaten and consumed by the sword.

So, the call to repentance is always going to make the appeal for change. But along with that, there are the positive and the negative motivations. We would expect God to simply pronounce the sentence, but the Lord is a God who is constantly willing to forgive his people.

I think about the fact that God reveals himself to Moses as I am in Exodus chapter three. And in many ways, that's a mysterious name. It always reminds me of who's on first, the old comedy routine with Abbot and Costello.

The Lord just doesn't seem to want to give him an answer. But part of the mystery there is that the Lord is going to fill out the meaning of that name by the dealings with his people. And when the Lord forgives the people after they've sinned with the golden calf, he says, I am a God who is merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in hesed, and abounding in covenant faithfulness.

That becomes a confessional statement about the Lord throughout the Old Testament. That's one of his characteristics. He is compassionate.

He's merciful. He keeps his covenant. He is slow to anger.

Literally in the Hebrew, he has a long nose. It takes a long time for God's nose to get red and angry and to flare where he's going to respond in judgment, and we see that throughout the Old Testament.

By the time that we get to Jeremiah, there have been hundreds of years of covenant infidelity. And so, we come to the end of chapter two, it makes perfect sense if God were simply to pronounce sentence on his people, but the fact of the matter is he's giving them an opportunity to repent. God does that.

That's what God is like. And I rejoice in the fact that I can see that and experience that. And I know that that's happened in my life as well.

Before we ever get to Jeremiah, there have been times when God has basically given Jerusalem a deadline and said, this is it. This is the end. In the eighth century, the century before Jeremiah, the prophet Micah said in chapter three, Micah chapter three, verses nine to 12, Zion is going to be plowed like a field, and the temple mount is going to become a heap of ruins.

I mean, it's a straightforward statement of judgment. There's no like, well, maybe you will, maybe he won't. But the people responded to God.

The king responded to God properly, and the Lord relented from sending that judgment. In the half-century before the time of Jeremiah's ministry, the prophet Manasseh had carried out, or the king Manasseh, had carried out his wicked reign, the worst king that Judah ever had. And the Lord says in one place, I am about to wipe Jerusalem like a dish.

I mean, there's already been at least two times where it looks like God has said, that's enough. I'm going to judge. There's no, but we come to the time of Jeremiah, the last days of the nation of Judah in the second half of the seventh century.

And the Lord's still giving them the opportunity to repent, even in the last days. I remember a politician a few years ago explaining why they had not fulfilled promises to carry something out at a specific time. And they said you have to understand that we're operating with a flexible deadline or a movable deadline.

And in many ways, that's how God deals with Israel. He comes to them in 701 BC and says, okay, I'm done. Jerusalem is going to be turned into a heap of ruins.

The temple is going to be brought down. Hezekiah and the people respond, God relents from sending the judgment. Manasseh, he's the worst king that Judah's ever had.

He's sacrificing his own sons. He's filled Jerusalem with bloodshed. I'm done.

I'm going to judge them. Josiah comes along, turns back to the Lord. The Lord relents.

Josiah, the last godly king, and the four kings that come after him are ungodly in every way. Everyone did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. God's still giving an opportunity for the people to repent.

That's the kind of God of the Old Testament. John Goldengate says that many times we compare the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New, and we think that the God of the Old Testament is the angry, judgmental, wrathful God, and the God of the New Testament is the God of love and mercy. He says in many ways, though, when we look at the God of the Old Testament, he's more the forgiving grandfather many times.

The God of the New Testament, the time has come that the Lord is overlooking the times of ignorance in the past, and he's demanding that people repent. Both sides of God are reflected in both the Old and the New, but in a sense, he has a point. God is loving, gracious, and merciful, and that's a side of the God of the Old Testament that I think often many people have missed and don't understand.

So, in light of the indictment in chapter two, there's every reason to think that there is no opportunity for Judah to repent. That's the issue that we're going to get into as we work our way through this text. The issue of returning to the Lord is going to be raised in chapter three, verses one and three.

There's a keyword in the book of Jeremiah that's going to be used a number of times. In fact, I think it's probably the key theological term in the book, but it's a term that is especially important in this book. And it's the word shub, which means to turn or to repent.

Now, in a literal sense, it means to turn around, and it can be used in that way. In a more theological sense, it can be used both in a positive and a negative way in the Old Testament. In the negative way, it talks about turning away from God.

We refer to people that have backsliden. They have slid back away from their devotion and loyalty to God. That's the idea of shub and its negative connotation.

The positive connotation is that shuv means to repent, change one's ways, or turn back to God. And we're actually going to see the term used in all of those ways here in this specific chapter. From Jeremiah chapter three, verse one to chapter four, verse four, I think my numbers are correct here.

The root shub is used 17 times in this one section. And so, I always tell my students, pay attention for things that are repeated. And even I am not dull enough to miss the fact that the word shub is fairly important here.

So, in the beginning section, chapter three, verse one, the whole issue of the possibility of return is raised. And I want to spend some time on this first verse. Here's what it says.

If a man divorces his wife and she goes away from him, okay, here's our marriage metaphor. If the Lord divorces Israel or Judah, and Israel or Judah goes away from him and becomes another man's wife, will he, the husband, return to her? And there's our word shub. Now, if a man divorces his wife, they become involved with other, is it possible for him to shub and to go back to his first wife? Would not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers.

Would you return to me, declares the Lord. Okay. Now what we have to understand here is that we need to understand the divorce law of the Old Testament.

We also need to understand that as the prophet's basically raising a question here, is it possible for there to be a shub between Israel and the Lord or between Judah and God after the way that they have turned away to these other gods and involved themselves in a relationship? Is that even possible? And in the beginning verses here, the possibility of this does not seem very likely. When it says, would you return to me, really the answer that's being expected here, we could almost phrase the question, you wouldn't expect to be able to return to me, would you, declares the Lord. The negative answer to this that's expected becomes more clear when we

understand the way that Jeremiah is alluding here to the divorce law that's found in the Mosaic law.

The key passage on divorce in the Pentateuch and the Mosaic law is found in Deuteronomy chapter 24, verses one to four. This verse is so important, or this passage is so important to what's going on in Jeremiah chapter three, that I really need to take a minute just to read through it. Here's what the law said.

When a man takes a wife and marries her if she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of the house and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter man hates her and writes a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter man dies who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, the first husband who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife. And after she has been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord, and you will not bring sin upon the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance. All right, here's basically the way that this worked.

The Old Testament divorce law said that if a man and a woman divorced if the man gave her a certificate of divorce, he was required to put that in writing. The divorce was allowed here if he found something that was indecent in her, and we're probably talking about something morally objectionable. It's not simply she burned the toast like some of the rabbis would later say.

If that man gave her that certificate of divorce, and if she married another man, what the law stipulated was that she could never return to her first husband ever again. Now, remember, God was not approving of divorce; he was not endorsing divorce. God's original design was that a man and a woman were to be married, they were to cleave together, this was a permanent union.

But Jesus says that the Mosaic law allowed divorce because of the hardness of man's heart. What Deuteronomy was trying to do was to limit the practice of divorce. It was trying to make sure that if a man would put away his wife, and the man here is the one who has the prerogative of doing that, he would only do that after very careful reflection.

Men in Israel were not to trade around their wives like baseball cards, and so he had to give her a certificate, and he had to realize that if I send this woman away, and if she marries another man, I can never take her back. When Jeremiah is thinking about the possibility of Israel coming back to the Lord, he is alluding specifically to this divorce law. And based on what this law says, the possibility of Judah coming back to God doesn't seem likely.

Now let me mention some specific ways that this divorce law is echoing itself behind Jeremiah chapter 2 and verse 3. Remember, the divorce law said that if a man finds something indecent in his wife, the Hebrew word there is matzah. Well, going back to chapter 2 verse 5, raising a question for Israel, the prophet says, what wrong did your fathers find in me? Matzah. So, in a situation, has Israel found something in God that would make God worthy of divorce? Down in chapter 3 verses 6 to 10, the Lord's going to talk about his relationship to the northern kingdom of Israel.

And in verse 8, he is going to say, I have given her a certificate and a decree of divorce. So, the Lord himself has followed the process that's in Deuteronomy 24. He's given them a certificate of divorce.

And as we think of the problem of divorce in our society, just think about the fact that the Lord himself has gone through that experience. We tend to want to make people second-class citizens who go through these kinds of things. The Lord experienced that in his own relationship with Israel.

When the divorce law talked about the first husband taking his wife back, the term that is used there is the word shub. Would he be allowed to return to take her? The verbs shub and lakak, that's the word that's being raised here. Would, would Israel be able to return to the Lord? In light of the fact that the husband in Deuteronomy 24 was not allowed to return to his first wife if she had married someone else, the question at the end of verse 1, would you now return to me, is expecting a negative answer.

Now in the NICOT, John Thompson says, well, the Lord actually has a loophole here that gets him around Deuteronomy 24 because Israel was never actually married to these other gods. But I think that really misses the point. In fact, what's going on here is that the situation that's envisioned in Jeremiah chapter 3 is much more flagrant than what we have in Deuteronomy 24.

Judah has not simply just married another man. They have committed infidelity after infidelity after infidelity. And in light of Deuteronomy 24, in light of the character of a righteous husband like God, yet would you now return to me, declares the Lord? The answer would be no. One other connection, and we'll, we'll wrap up with this, is that Deuteronomy 24, we'll, we'll talk about the fact that if a man returned to take his first wife back after she had been married to another man, it would make the land unclean, Tameh.

And there are a number of references in chapter 2 to how Israel has defiled the land. And again, the word that's used there is Tameh. In chapter 3, verse 1 in Jeremiah, would not that land be greatly polluted? And the root there is another Hebrew word, Hanaf, but the same basic idea here.

When a woman had been unfaithful to her husband after the divorce had taken place, for him to go back to her, in a sense, would pollute the land. Okay. So, everything about this reference to Deuteronomy chapter 24 that Jeremiah develops here expects us again to say, I don't think this relationship's restorable.

They're indicted in chapter 2. They're unfaithful. They're, they're guilty of adultery. In a sense, the Lord could command the death penalty in light of the Pentateuch.

In light of the Pentateuch in Deuteronomy chapter 24, there's not the great likelihood that they could ever come back to the Lord anyway. This seems like a hopeless situation. Now, as we move forward into the chapter, verse 2, again, is going to say, lift up your eyes to the bare heights and see, where have you not been ravished by the wayside you have sat awaiting lovers like an Arab in the wilderness? You have polluted the land, Hanaph, with your whoredom.

So, they, they have, they have defiled everything that Deuteronomy 24 warned would happen when marriage was not respected. That's happened in Israel's relationship with God. Now, the Lord has responded with judgment.

Therefore, the showers have been withheld, the spring rains have not come, yet you have the forehead of a whore. You refuse to be ashamed. Have you not just called to me, my father, you are the friend of my youth? Will he be angry forever? Will he be indignant to the end? Behold, you have spoken, but you have done all the evil that you could.

The possibility of return doesn't seem very likely in light of Israel's attitude or Judah's attitude as well. They continue to practice these sins and these adulteries. They have a hard heart.

They're not even ashamed of what they've done. In light of this, return doesn't seem possible. Chapter three, verses six to 11.

Past history doesn't seem to indicate that return is possible. Present history doesn't suggest that as well. In the message that's given to Israel and to Judah in chapter three, verses six to 11, our word, shub, becomes very prominent.

So let me read what's going on here. The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah, have you seen what she did? That faithless one, Israel, and there's our first use of the word shub. The word shub, faithless, it can mean turning to the Lord, but it can also mean turning away from the Lord.

So, the way that the Lord describes the Northern Kingdom is she's a turning away one. So, the Lord wants them to turn in the right direction back to him. What Judah

and Israel have continued to do is to turn left and to go as far away from him as they can go.

They're like Jonah, running away from the presence of God. Have you seen what faithless Israel did? How she went up on every high hill and under every green tree and played the whore there? That's the Northern Kingdom. And I thought, after she has done this, she will shub, she will return to me.

But she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it as well. So, Israel is a turning away people. They're a shub people who are turning away from God.

Judah is a treacherous people. And the Lord says, I punished Israel, and I punished her for, and in light of this, I believe that my people Judah, my other wife, they would see this and they would shub back to God, but they're responding just like Israel did. And in the recent history here, they have not turned back to God any more than Israel did.

So, he goes on to say in verse eight, she saw that for all of the adulteries of the faithless one Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce. Judah saw this. They saw what happened to turning away Israel.

Yet her treacherous sister did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. Because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land committing adultery with stone and trees. Yet for all of this, her treacherous sister did not shub, return to me with her whole heart.

Israel did not return. And in recent history, Judah has not returned. And in a sense, Judah is worse than Israel because they saw what happened to their sister, and yet they continued in their sinful ways.

And I think that the people in the Southern kingdom of Judah would said, hey, look, we're not as apostate as the Northern kingdom. We have the approved sanctuary in Jerusalem. We follow the leadership of the Davidic king.

Jeremiah's rhetoric, however, is you're worse than Israel because you haven't learned from their example. So past history, they've committed all kinds of whoredoms. They've done this repeatedly throughout their history.

In present history, they have not learned from the example of turning away Israel. And so you think, wow, God's finished. But here's the amazing thing.

There is a turn in verse 11 in this passage. And what is going to happen is that there are going to be repeated calls for the people to return. Okay.

Now let me think, let's think about what that means. At the beginning of chapter three, in light of Deuteronomy 24, it is, it seems impossible on the basis of law that God himself had established that he could ever take his wife back. Here's the point.

God loves Judah so much that he is willing to set aside his own divorce law to take his people back. That's an amazing degree of love. In light of the past history, in light of the present history, where Judah and Israel have not returned, the Lord is still saying to his people that there's still a chance.

The deadline has moved again, and God is giving his people an opportunity to return. And so what's going to happen in the second half of chapter three, after all these reasons why there should be no return, there is repeatedly the call, return to me, and I will restore you. Verse 11, the Lord said to me, turning away Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.

Go and proclaim these words toward the north and say this: return faithless Israel declares the Lord, for I will not look on your anger for I am merciful, declares the Lord. There's our first call. Return to me. Now, historically, it tells us that Jeremiah proclaimed these words toward the north in the early days of his ministry during the time of Josiah.

And the Lord, I think, is calling the exiles from the Assyrian crisis to return to the Lord, to join themselves back to Judah. In Josiah's day, it looks like the possibility of a national reunification. And if the people of Israel will abandon their apostate ways and turn back to the Lord, they can join with Josiah and be part of this.

We know historically that didn't happen. And so, what this message now means that in a historical way was applied to that specific situation. Now, as part of the canonical biblical text, it has become a recurring call for Israel, even after the destruction of Jerusalem has occurred, for them to come back to God.

The Lord gave the northern kingdom an opportunity in the early days of Jeremiah's ministry. That didn't happen. But that abiding, continuing word of God lives on for the exiles.

Return to me, faithless Israel. Here's the only thing they have to do, verse 12. Only acknowledge your guilt that you rebelled against the Lord your God and scattered your favor among the foreigners under every green tree, and you have not obeyed my voice, declares the Lord.

Acknowledge your sin. Instead of being like you were in chapter 2 when you're saying, I don't know what you're talking about. I have not gone after the Baals.

I am innocent. What have I done? Just acknowledge your faithlessness, and the Lord will restore you. Verse 14, second call.

Return, O faithless children. Two uses of the word shew there. Turn back to me, O turning away children, 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. Again, I think the restoration that was envisioned during the times of Josiah, it didn't happen, but there's an ongoing call of the Lord even after the exile or even during the days of Jeremiah's ministry to the people of Judah before the Babylonians took the city. That message keeps being reapplied.

Come back to me. The Lord's giving you an opportunity to return. There's a promise of what the restoration would look like.

Remember that whenever the Lord gives cause to repentance, there's always a positive appeal. And here's the promise of what the Lord is going to do for them. If you will return to me, I will give you shepherds after my own heart who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.

And when you have multiplied and increased in the land in those days, declares the Lord, they will no longer say the ark of the covenant of the Lord. It will not come to mine or even be remembered. At that time, Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the Lord and all nations will gather to it, to the presence of the Lord in Jerusalem.

And they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart. And this is looking forward to the future kingdom. And the Lord was promising them a restoration on that level if they would turn to him at this time.

Salvation history would be a much shorter story if the people had originally turned to God. But in many ways, they're just like us. And so, God is continuing to reach out to rebellious people.

In verse 22, we have three uses of the root, shub, in this particular passage. Return, shub, O faithless ones. Turn back to me, O turning away sons, and I will heal your turning away.

So, the Lord says, look, I know you got a problem with turning away, but if you come back to me, I will do heart surgery on you so that you won't have this disposition to turn away from me. And ultimately that's what God is going to do in the new covenant. I'll write the law on your hearts.

This history of turning away is going to be reversed. Finally, the last appeal to return is given to us in chapter four, verse one. And there are two uses of the verb *shub* in this passage as well.

If you return, O Israel, declares the Lord, to me, you should return. That's what the Lord wants. And here's what that will look like.

If you remove your detestable things from my presence and do not waver, look, you're going to have to get rid of your idols. It can no longer be God, plus all of these other gods. It's going to have to be Yahweh alone.

And if you swear as the Lord lives in truth and in justice and righteousness, then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory. Now this passage is important because it reminds us what is at stake in the turning of Israel. The turning of Israel was not just important for Israel but for the blessings that Israel would experience in the land as the chosen people of God.

This passage takes us back to the Abrahamic covenant. And remember the Abrahamic covenant, God made three specific promises to Abraham. He said I'm going to make you a great nation.

I'm going to give you a land, and all nations will be blessed. And in other passages it says, all nations will bless themselves in Abraham. What God had designed was that Abraham and his people, the chosen people of God, would mediate as a kingdom of priests, God's blessing to the other nations.

What Jeremiah is reminding the people of in chapter 4 is that not only has your sin affected you, but your sin has deprived the other nations to whom you were to mediate God's blessing and God's protection and God's presence. And so, he says, if you'll turn back to me, verse 2, then the nations will be able to bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory. Look, the design of the Abrahamic covenant will finally work if you will do what God calls.

So even in these early chapters of Jeremiah, the blessings of the kingdom of God that are ultimately going to happen in the final kingdom are really being offered to Israel in chapter 3 and chapter 4 in the days of Jeremiah. The things that God had designed, God's kingdom, God's blessings, God's presence, the instrumentality of Israel being used to mediate those blessings, that's what God is promising to restore here. This section concludes with a couple of very effective images that remind us what returning to the Lord is going to be like.

And here's what those images are in verses 3 and 4. For thus says the Lord to the men of Judah and Jerusalem, break up your fallow ground and sow not among the thorns. The hard soil of your human heart, break that up, plow the ground so that

the seed of God's word can begin to produce fruit in your life. It reminds us very much of Jesus' parable of the sowers.

There are all kinds of soil. There's only one kind of soil that receives the seed, and it begins to produce fruit. That's what a true believer does.

Sow not among the thorns. Jesus talked about the thorns, the cares of this world that choke out. Jeremiah uses similar imagery here for people in an agrarian society.

And then, finally, in verse 4, circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your hearts. O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest my wrath go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it because of the evil of your deeds. What we have here is that there's a final call to repentance, and now, instead of the positive promises of what God will do, there's the warning, just like in the book of Amos, that if you don't repent, if you do not change your ways, if you do not break up the fallow ground, if you do not circumcise your hearts, then God's wrath is going to break out like fire.

The image of circumcision was the covenant sign that God had given to Abraham and his people. The circumcising of the foreskin was a reminder that they belonged to the Lord. And that image is used here and in the book of Deuteronomy, circumcise your hearts.

Cut away whatever it is that is resisting turning back to God, do heart surgery, and ultimately follow me. And so, we really end up with a very interesting image in Jeremiah chapter two, what one writer has referred to as the image of the circumscribed prostitute. In chapter two, an unfaithful prostitute who has turned away from her husband.

In chapter four, a circumcised son who is a member of the covenant enjoys all of the blessings that God has provided for his people in spite of their infidelity. In spite of what appeared to be inflexible deadlines in the past, the Lord is still providing them the opportunity to return. Now, we need to understand as we study the book of Jeremiah that this is setting in place the plot of the book.

When my wife and I, when we sit down to watch a movie, or we sit down to watch a television show, if we come to the end of that and say, I don't think that movie had much of a plot, generally that means we didn't enjoy the story. There wasn't something there that held our attention. In Jeremiah, the thing that's going to hold our attention is how they respond. And I think we know and we understand in light of the history of the Old Testament, and what happens here is that Jeremiah, his ministry, ultimately was a failure from a human perspective because the people did not respond.

They did not listen. And we'll develop this more as we get into the rest of the book, but just a couple of passages that are going to set this up for us. Chapter 8, verses 4 and 5. You shall say to them, thus says the Lord, when men fall, do they not rise again? Okay, natural thing, you fall down, you trip, you get up.

If one turns away, he does not return. If you go on a plane trip, you generally buy a two-way ticket and turn back home. Why have these people turned away in perpetual turning away, backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, and they refuse to return.

So basically, here's what's going to happen in the book of Jeremiah. My people are guilty. I'm giving them the opportunity to return.

They can enjoy the blessings of the kingdom, the peace, the security, and a transformed heart. God will do that for them. Or they can refuse to return, and the fierce anger of the Lord will not turn away.

And in chapter 8 verses 4 and 5, we already have the answer of the people. They will not return. Chapter 4 says, circumcise your hearts and come back to God.

Chapter 6, verse 10 says, to whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised. They cannot listen. Behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn.

You know, I hear the word of the Lord in Jeremiah chapters 2 and 3 and 4, and it's like, wow, what an amazing expression of God's love. God loves his unfaithful bride so much that in spite of what they've done, he's like Hosea. He's willing to go find Gomer and bring her back and buy her out of her bondage and love her and restore her and make that a permanent loving relationship.

They scorn the word of God, and they view that warning with contempt. As we work our way through the rest of the book of Jeremiah, we're going to find out the results and the consequences of faithless Israel refusing to turn back. And the consequences are going to be devastating.

When we get to the destruction of Jerusalem in chapter 39, that's the direct result of the people failing to turn back to the Lord. Maureen O'Connor, as she has studied this book, notices that one of the things that we see in the book of Jeremiah in chapters 1 to 25, that calls to return are going to predominate in chapters 2 to 10. We've already discovered just in chapter 3 and the early part of chapter 4, there are 17 uses of the word shub.

What O'Connor notes, though, is that in chapters 10 to 20 in Jeremiah, there are only three calls to return, only three specific places. And then, as we move from chapters

21 to 25, essentially, those calls to return disappear. What we find out is that the book of Jeremiah itself, is not a haphazard collection of random messages.

It's making a point. Judah had the opportunity to turn back to God, to experience his love, to enjoy that confessional statement about the Lord that he's abounding in mercy, loving kindness. He's slow to anger.

He's willing to forgive. He keeps covenant faithfulness for a thousand generations. They lose that opportunity.

The tragedy of this missed opportunity to avoid judgment is that it's an awful thing that the judgment occurs. The more tragic thing is to realize and understand that the judgment was absolutely unnecessary. And we're going to see, not just in Jeremiah in chapters 1 to 25, the message of indictment.

We're also going to see the missed opportunity to repent and to come back to the Lord and to experience his mercy and his grace.

This is Dr. Gary Yates in his course on the book of Jeremiah. This is session number 10, Jeremiah 3.1-4.4, The Call to Repentance, Shub.