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Introduction

Sequel of the exhortations and promises addressed to Israel in the preceding chapter, Jeremiah 4:1, Jeremiah 4:2. The prophet then addresses the people of Judah and Jerusalem, exhorting to repentance and reformation, that the dreadful visitation with which they were threatened might be averted, Jeremiah 4:3, Jeremiah 4:4. He then sounds the alarm of war, Jeremiah 4:5, Jeremiah 4:6. Nebuchadnezzar, like a fierce lion, is, from the certainty of the prophecy, represented to be on his march; and the disastrous event to have been already declared, Jeremiah 4:7-9. And as the lying prophets had flattered the people with the hopes of peace and safety, they are now introduced, (when their predictions are falsified by the event), excusing themselves; and, with matchless effrontery, laying the blame of the deception upon God, (â€œAnd they said,â€• etc., so the text is corrected by Kennicott), Jeremiah 4:10. The prophet immediately resumes his subject; and, in the person of God, denounces again those judgments which were shortly to be inflicted by Nebuchadnezzar, Jeremiah 4:11-18. The approaching desolation of Jerusalem lamented in language amazingly energetic and exquisitely tender, Jeremiah 4:19-21. The incorrigible wickedness of the people the sole cause of these calamities, Jeremiah 4:22. In the remaining verses the prophet describes the sad catastrophe of Jerusalem by such a beautiful assemblage of the most striking and afflictive circumstances as form a picture of a land â€œswept with the besom of destruction.â€• The earth seems ready to return to its original chaos; every ray of light is extinguished, and succeeded by a frightful gloom; the mountains tremble, and the hills shake, under the dreadful apprehension of the wrath of Jehovah; all is one awful solitude, where not a vestige of the human race is to be seen. Even the fowls of heaven, finding no longer whereon to subsist, are compelled to migrate; the most fruitful places are become a dark and dreary desert, and every city is a ruinous heap. To complete the whole, the dolorous shrieks of Jerusalem, as of a woman in peculiar agony, break through the frightful gloom; and the appalled prophet pauses, leaving the reader to reflect on the dreadful effects of apostasy and idolatry, Jeremiah 4:23-31.

Verse 1

Shalt thou not remove - This was spoken before the Babylonish captivity; and here is a promise that if they will return from their idolatry, they shall not be led into captivity. So, even that positively threatened judgment would have been averted had they returned to the Lord.

Verse 2

Thou shalt swear, The Lord liveth - Thou shalt not bind thyself by any false god; thou shalt acknowledge Me as the Supreme. Bind thyself By me, and To me; and do this in truth, in judgment, and in righteousness.

The nations shall bless themselves in him - They shall be so fully convinced of the power and goodness of Jehovah in seeing the change wrought on thee, and the mercies heaped upon thee, that their usual mode of benediction shall be, May the God of Israel bless thee!

Verse 3

Break up your fallow ground - Fallow ground is either that which, having been once tilled, has lain long uncultivated; or, ground slightly ploughed, in order to be ploughed again previously to its being sown. Ye have been long uncultivated in righteousness; let true repentance break up your fruitless and hardened hearts; and when the seed of the word of life is sown in them, take heed that worldly cares and concerns do not arise, and, like thorns, choke the good seed.

Verse 4

Circumcise yourselves - Put away every thing that has a tendency to grieve the Spirit of God, or to render your present holy resolutions unfruitful.

Verse 5

Blow ye the trumpet - Give full information to all parts of the land, that the people may assemble together and defend themselves against their invaders.

Verse 6

I will bring evil from the north - From the land of Chaldea.

Verse 7

The lion is come up - Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. â€œThe king (Nebuchadnezzar) is come up from his tower.â€• - Targum.

The destroyer of the Gentiles - Of the nations: of all the people who resisted his authority. He destroyed them all.

Verse 8

Lament and howl - חָיִל וְהוֹלָה (heililu). The aboriginal Irish had a funeral song called the Caoinian, still continued among their descendants, one part of which is termed the ulaloo: this is sung responsively or alternately, and is accompanied with a full chorus of sighs and groans. It has been thought that Ireland was originally peopled by the Phoenicians: if so, this will account for the similarity of many words and customs among both these people.

Verse 9

The heart of the king shall perish - Shall lose all courage.

Verse 10

Ah, Lord God! surely thou hast greatly deceived this people - The Targum paraphrases this verse thus: "And I said, Receive my supplication, O Lord God; for, behold, the false prophets deceive this people and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Ye shall have peace." The prophet could not reconcile this devastation of the country with the promises already made; and he appears to ask the question, Hast thou not then deceived this people in saying there shall be peace, i.e., prosperity?

Whereas the sword reacheth unto the soul - That is, the life; the people being generally destroyed.

Verses 11-13

A dry wind - a fall wind - as clouds - as a whirlwind - All these expressions appear to refer to the pestilential winds, suffocating vapors, and clouds and pillars of sand collected by whirlwinds, which are so common and destructive in the east, (see on Isaiah 21:1 (note)); and these images are employed here to show the overwhelming effect of the invasion of the land by the Chaldeans.

Verse 13

Wo unto us! - The people, deeply affected with these threatened judgments, interrupt the prophet with the lamentation - Wo unto us, for we are spoiled! The prophet then resumes: -

Verse 14

O Jerusalem, wash thine heart - Why do ye not put away your wickedness, that ye may be saved from these tremendous judgments? How long shall thy vain thoughts of safety and prosperity lodge within thee? Whilst thou continuest a rebel against God, and provokest him daily by thy abominations!

Verse 15

For a voice declareth from Dan - Dan was a city in the tribe of Dan, north of Jerusalem; the first city in Palestine, which occurs in the way from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Affliction from Mount Ephraim - Between Dan and Jerusalem are the mountains of Ephraim. These would be the first places attacked by the Chaldeans; and the rumor from thence would show that the land was invaded.

Verse 16

Watchers come from a far country - Persons to besiege fortified places.

Verse 17

As keepers of a field - In the eastern countries grain is often sown in the open country; and, when nearly ripe, guards are placed at different distances round about it to preserve it from being plundered. Jerusalem was watched, like one of these fields, by guards all round about it; so that none could enter to give assistance, and none who wished to escape were permitted to go out.

Verse 19

My bowels - From this to the twenty-ninth verse the prophet describes the ruin of Jerusalem and the desolation of Judea by the Chaldeans in language and imagery scarcely paralleled in the whole Bible. At the sight of misery the bowels are first affected; pain is next felt by a sort of stricture in the pericardium; and then, the heart becoming strongly affected by irregular palpitations, a gush of tears, accompanied with wailings, is the issue. - "My bowels, my bowels! I am pained at my very heart, (the walls of my heart); my heart maketh a noise in me; I cannot hold my peace." Here is nature, and fact also.

Verse 20

Destruction upon destruction - Cities burnt, and their inhabitants destroyed.

My tents spoiled - Even the solitary dwellings in the fields and open country do not escape.

Verse 23

I beheld the earth, (the land), and lo it was without form and void - ךָא״ ךָ ךָ״״ ךָ״״ (tohu vabohu); the very words used in Genesis to denote the formless state of the chaotic mass before God had brought it into order.

Verse 24

The mountains - hills - Princes, rulers, etc., were astonished and fled.

Verse 25

The birds of the heavens were fled - The land was so desolated that even the fowls of heaven could not find meat, and therefore fled away to another region. How powerfully energetic is this description!

See Zephaniah 1:3.

Verse 30

Though thou rentest thy face with painting - This probably refers to the custom of introducing stibium a preparation of antimony, between the eye and the lids, in order to produce a fine lustre, which occasions a distension of the eye-lid in the time of the operation. In order to heighten the effect from this some may have introduced a more than ordinary quantity, so as nearly to rend the eye-lid itself. Though thou make use of every means of address, of cunning, and of solicitation, to get assistance from the neighboring states, it will be all in vain. Reference is here particularly made to the practice of harlots to allure men.

Verse 31

Bringeth forth her first child - In such a case the fear, danger, and pain were naturally the greatest.

Spreadeth her hands - The gesture indicated by nature to signify distress, and implore help. We have met with this figure in other parts, and among the classic writers it is frequent.