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“WHAT’S THE WORST THAT COULD HAPPEN?”

Jeremiah 4:11-30

What is the worst that could happen?

☑ If you live in a dictatorship that demands absolute compliance, it is right to consider *“What is the worst that could happen if we disobey?”* and also *“What is the worst that could happen if we obey?”*

☑ But if you are a 4-year-old boy and the farmer cautions you to walk where he does as you cross his pasture, it is stupid to ask *“What is the worst that could happen if I don’t?”* I did so, and dozens of wasps stung me when I stepped in their nest in the ground.

Posed in pursuit of liberty, mercy, justice, and truth *“What is the worst that could happen?”* is a good and wise question. Asked in service to self-indulgence, self-justification or sin it is a wrong and foolish question.

☐ Please turn with me to Jeremiah 4.

🕒 It is about 625 or 624 B.C. The people of Judah are entangled in social, legal and economic injustice. They are self-serving and thoughtless of others. And they are in bondage to {1 Jn 2:16, NRSV} **“the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes,”** and **“the pride in riches”** which prohibit a constructive relationship with God.

So the LORD has sent the prophet Jeremiah. He has been preaching about fools who prefer seepage from a cistern to fresh-flowing spring water, and the amazing grace of a husband who would risk humiliation to renew his marriage to his fickle and promiscuous wife.

Anyone who is paying the least bit of attention has got to be asking, ***“What is the worst that could happen if we don’t do what he tells us?”*** Jeremiah 4 answers that question in gut-wrenching detail.

■ Verses 11-12: **“A scorching wind from the barren heights in the desert blows toward my people, but not to winnow or cleanse; a wind too strong for that comes from me. Now I pronounce my judgments against them.”**

📖 Farmers in Judah winnow their grain. They toss it in the air, and the straw and chaff float away in the breeze as the heavier heads of barley or wheat fall to the ground. But this is no breeze: it is the simoom, a ferociously strong, blisteringly hot wind (with temperatures up to 130° F) that comes loaded with suffocating dust. The simoom is a vivid image of God’s judgment inflicted through military invasion.

■ Verses 13 and 15-17:

**“Look! He advances like the clouds,
his chariots come like a whirlwind,
his horses are swifter than eagles.
Woe to us! We are ruined!
A voice is announcing from Dan,**

– in the 7th century B.C. Dan is a town north of the Sea of Galilee, near the source of the Jordan River –

**proclaiming disaster from the hills of
Ephraim**

– The southern edge of Ephraim is a few miles north of Jerusalem. Assyria absorbed it in 722 B.C.

but they are losing their grip, and a few years ago (in 629 B.C.) King Josiah regained the territory of Ephraim. –

**A voice is announcing from Dan,
proclaiming disaster from the hills of
Ephraim.**

– The alarm begins up north and is frantically relayed southward –

**“Tell this to the nations,
proclaim it to Jerusalem:
‘A besieging army is coming from a distant
land,
raising a war cry against the cities of
Judah.**

**They surround her like men guarding a field,
because she has rebelled against me,”
declares the LORD.**

If Judah does not return, this *will* come to pass. It is part of the worst that could happen.

■ Verse 18: In the event that Judah whimpers, How could God do this to us? He explains,

**“Your own conduct and actions
have brought this upon you.
This is your punishment.
How bitter it is!
How it pierces to the heart!”**

To be sure, if Judah is {Jer 1:10} “[uprooted], [torn] **down...** [destroyed] **and** [overthrown]” it is the Sovereign

LORD who will accomplish it through his {Heb 4:12} **“living and active”** word – not by supernatural means, but through the Babylonian juggernaut.

Yet the blame will not rest on God’s shoulders. He has endured Israel’s immorality, greed, social injustices, and idolatry for centuries. He has sent dozens of prophets to urge revival: {Heb 11:36-38} **“Some faced jeers and flogging ... others were chained and put in prison. [Some] were stoned.... Sawn in two... put to death by the sword”**; but on those rare occasions when Judah has repented, he has always welcomed them back and blessed them.

God has warned Jeremiah’s listeners time after time. If this disaster happens, it will be a direct consequence of Judah’s insistent failure.

⊗ Several major themes intersect here: the sovereign word of God, human responsibility, the stupidity of idolatry, and judgment as the outcome of disobedient history.

But we have not seen the very worst that could happen. Let’s read Jeremiah 4:23-26, comparing and contrasting it with selected verses from Genesis 1 and 2.

■ Jeremiah 4:23:

**I looked at the earth,
and it was formless and empty;
and at the heavens,
and their light was gone.**

○ Compare this with Genesis 1:1-2a: **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.**

Now the earth was formless and empty,” it was in such utter chaos that it could not support biological life. The expression appears only twice in Scripture: in Ge 1 it describes the earth before God does his creative best; in Jer 4 it describes the earth after humans have done their uncreative worst.

○ Likewise, in Genesis 1:14-18 God creates the sun, moon, and stars **“to separate the day from the night, and [to] serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and... to give light on the earth.”** But now day is as night: seasons, days and years have lost their social meaning; the light is quenched.

■ Jeremiah 4:24:

**I looked at the mountains,
and they were quaking;
all the hills were swaying.**

Mountains and hills are symbols of stability and security. People sometimes hide there when an enemy attacks. But where do you flee for safety when even the mountains are quaking underfoot?

■ Jeremiah 4:25:

**I looked and there were no people;
every bird in the sky had flown away.**

○ Contrast this with Genesis 1:20-22, where the Almighty creates the birds and instructs them to **“increase on the earth.”** But in Jeremiah 4 they have been driven away by the tumult of battle.

○ And in Genesis 1:26-28 he makes humans and blesses them, saying: **“Be fruitful and increase in**

number; fill the earth.” But now most have died of starvation, disease, and violence and the rest have been marched off into exile, leaving the land empty.

■ Jeremiah 4:26:

**I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert;
all its towns lay in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.**

○ Contrast this with Genesis 1:29-30 in which our Great Provider gives the humans **“every seed-bearing plant ... and every [fruited] tree.”** But in Jeremiah 4 the plants and trees have been obliterated.

○ Also with Genesis 2:8-15 where YHWH places them in a lush and fertile garden that is every horticulturist’s dream. But now the land has been so ravaged by drought and pillaging armies and scorched earth atrocities that it has been reduced to a desert.

✧ We have come across the theme of the land before in this series, with an emphasis on the land as witness to God’s generosity and human stewardship.

✧ This is further developed in chapter 4 which reveals a correlation between the spiritual condition of humans and the physical condition of the land.

→ As the apostle declares (Ro 8:19-21 NIV/ NRSV): **“The creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to futility... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”**

When YHWH places Adam in Eden he commissions him to cultivate and protect it {Ge 2:15}. The man is to share in God's work of creation by gently developing the earth.

Later, when the LORD God gives the Law, his statutes foster a peaceful, prosperous human community. This requires the right use of land because the careful development of resources is to everyone's benefit, while their wanton destruction hurts us all.

When we draw near to God in faithful obedience we strengthen his creation. When we disobey him, we weaken it. In Jeremiah the impact is extreme: creation is {Brueggemann} **“being nullified, regressing to the murky conditions of Genesis 1:2.... Wholesale dismantling follows wholesale disobedience.”**

I have focused on the land today, in keeping with the emphasis in verses 23-26. But the same dynamic is at work in the human world, as well.

It happens in an individual body when harmful lifestyle choices contribute to disease, organ failure, or mental or emotional illness. That is the opposite of God's creative work: it is uncreation.

It happens in a household when infidelity, abuse, or rebellion cause family breakdown. That is the opposite of God's creative work: it is uncreation.

It happens in a community when personal irresponsibility, socio-economic injustice, or failing institutions plunge it into poverty and violence. That is the opposite of God's creative work: it is uncreation.

And it happens in a nation when greed, a lust for power, and godlessness lead to radical social inequality,

internal division, and external warfare. That is the opposite of God's creative work: it is uncreation.

In Jeremiah the impact is extreme: creation is **“being nullified.... Wholesale dismantling follows wholesale disobedience.”**

■ But it is not too late! Jeremiah 4:14: Even now our kind and merciful God pleads, **“O Jerusalem, wash the evil from your heart and be saved.”**

⊙ His words echo the theme of the invincible, unconditional love of God.

★ They also confirm that there are conditions for a personal, constructive relationship with him: namely, the admission of guilt, a transformed life, and a reoriented heart and mind.

Jeremiah was not written to us, but it was written for us. God is speaking to individuals, households, churches, and perhaps cities and nations, saying: {Jer 3:14; 4:14} **“Return, faithless people! Wash the evil from your heart and be saved. How long will you harbor wicked thoughts?”**

What is the worst that could happen if we refuse his gracious invitation? The uncreation of our lives, our families, our communities, our world.