

Jeremiah 14:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Because the ground is chapt, for there was no rain in the earth, the plowmen were ashamed, they covered their heads.

Analysis

Because the ground is chapt, for there was no rain in the earth, the plowmen were ashamed, they covered their heads. This verse appears within Jeremiah's prophetic lament describing severe drought as divine judgment upon Judah's persistent idolatry and covenant unfaithfulness. The drought imagery is both literal (actual agricultural crisis) and symbolic (spiritual barrenness resulting from broken covenant relationship with God). The Hebrew word חַתָּה (chattah, "chapt" or "cracked") describes ground so parched that deep fissures form—earth gaping with thirst, soil hardened and broken, agricultural land rendered useless for cultivation. This vivid image captures total agricultural devastation: no moisture penetrates the ground, no seed can germinate, no crops can grow, and famine inevitably follows.

"For there was no rain in the earth" (כִּי לֹא-הָיָה גֶּשֶׁם בָּאָרֶץ) explains the cracked ground's cause—complete absence of rainfall in a land entirely dependent on seasonal rains for agricultural survival. Ancient Israel's climate featured two critical rainy seasons: the "former rains" (October-November) softening soil for plowing and planting, and the "latter rains" (March-April) enabling crops to mature before summer harvest. Without these seasonal rains, agriculture failed completely. The drought description emphasizes totality: "no rain" whatsoever, affecting "the earth" or "the land" comprehensively. This wasn't localized dry spell or delayed rains but comprehensive drought devastating the entire region—precisely the covenant curse Moses warned would result from disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:23-24: "thy heaven that is over thy head shall be

brass, and the earth that is under thee shall be iron").

The agricultural crisis provokes profound shame: "the plowmen were ashamed" (בֹּשׁוּ אֱקָרִים, *boshu ikkarim*). The verb בֹּשׁ (bosh) means to be ashamed, confounded, disappointed, or put to shame—encompassing both the emotional experience of humiliation and the objective reality of failed expectations and hopes. Ikkarim (plowmen/farmers) were not merely agricultural laborers but representatives of the entire agrarian economy on which ancient societies depended. Their shame reflects multiple dimensions:

1. professional failure—their expertise and labor prove futile against drought
2. economic devastation—crop failure means financial ruin
3. social humiliation—inability to provide for families and community
4. spiritual conviction—recognition that the drought is divine judgment for national sin.

In agricultural societies where success depended on divine blessing and failure indicated divine displeasure, crop failure carried profound theological implications beyond mere economic hardship.

"They covered their heads" (מִנְפָּר וְאַשְׁמָן, *chafu rosham*) describes a culturally recognized gesture of mourning, shame, grief, and devastation. Covering the head appears throughout Scripture as response to overwhelming sorrow, public disgrace, or catastrophic loss (2 Samuel 15:30—David fleeing Absalom's rebellion; Esther 6:12—Haman after public humiliation; Jeremiah 2:37—Judah's shame in broken alliances). The gesture physically enacts the desire to hide from public view, to shield oneself from others' gazes, to withdraw from normal social interaction. It expresses the farmers' total demoralization: they cannot fix the situation, cannot meet expectations, cannot fulfill their roles, and cannot avoid the shame of failure. More profoundly, it represents the entire nation's spiritual condition—ashamed before God because covenant unfaithfulness has provoked His judgment, yet too proud or stubborn to genuinely repent and return to Him.

The broader context (Jeremiah 14:1-15:9) reveals this drought as divine judgment for Judah's idolatry and refusal to heed prophetic warnings. Water sources fail (v. 3), wild animals suffer (v. 6), and people cry to God (v. 7)—yet their prayers remain

hollow because they refuse genuine repentance. God explicitly forbids Jeremiah to intercede for the people (v. 11) because their sin has crossed the point of no return. False prophets promise peace and prosperity (v. 13), but God declares coming judgment through sword, famine, and pestilence (vv. 15-16). The cracked ground and ashamed farmers thus symbolize not merely agricultural crisis but spiritual bankruptcy—a people so hardened in sin that even severe judgment fails to produce authentic repentance. Just as no rain falls to soften the cracked earth, no genuine contrition softens Judah's hardened hearts. Just as farmers cover their heads in shame yet cannot fix the drought, so Judah experiences judgment's consequences yet refuses the repentance that would restore covenant blessing.

Historical Context

Jeremiah prophesied during Judah's final decades (approximately 627-585 BC), witnessing the nation's spiritual, political, and military collapse culminating in Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem (586 BC) and the temple's burning. His ministry spanned five kings' reigns: Josiah (640-609 BC), whose reforms temporarily reversed idolatry; Jehoahaz (609 BC, reigned three months); Jehoiakim (609-598 BC), who reinstated pagan practices; Jehoiachin (598-597 BC, reigned three months); and Zedekiah (597-586 BC), during whose reign Jerusalem fell. Throughout this period, Jeremiah consistently proclaimed that Judah's covenant unfaithfulness—idolatry, social injustice, false worship—would provoke divine judgment through Babylonian conquest unless genuine national repentance occurred.

Chapter 14's drought imagery reflects both historical reality and covenant theology. Palestine's climate made agriculture entirely dependent on seasonal rainfall. Archaeological studies of ancient agricultural practices reveal sophisticated water management (cisterns, terracing, irrigation channels) attempting to maximize scarce water resources. Yet all such efforts proved futile when seasonal rains failed. Ancient Near Eastern texts from surrounding cultures document drought's devastating effects—crop failure, livestock death, economic collapse, social upheaval, political instability, increased warfare over diminished resources, mass migration, and widespread starvation. The Baal Cycle from Ugarit (13th century BC) reveals Canaanite religious response to drought: increased

sacrifices to Baal (storm and fertility god) seeking rain. Ironically, Judah's syncretistic worship incorporated Baal veneration (Jeremiah 2:8, 23; 7:9), expecting this pagan deity to provide rain—the very sin provoking Yahweh to withhold rain and expose Baal's impotence.

Deuteronomy 11:13-17 and 28:23-24 explicitly connected covenant obedience with agricultural blessing and disobedience with drought: "If ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments...I will give you the rain of your land in his due season...that thou mayest gather in thy corn...Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods...and then the LORD'S wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain." Solomon's temple dedication prayer acknowledged this covenant principle (1 Kings 8:35-36): "When heaven is shut up, and there is no rain, because they have sinned against thee; if they pray toward this place, and confess thy name, and turn from their sin, when thou afflictest them: Then hear thou in heaven, and forgive the sin of thy servants." Elijah's drought during Ahab's reign (1 Kings 17-18) demonstrated this theology dramatically: three and a half years without rain because of Baal worship, ended only when Israel acknowledged Yahweh as the true God.

Jeremiah 14's drought thus wasn't random natural disaster but covenant-predicted consequence of specific sin—particularly idolatry and false worship. The people's prayers (vv. 7-9, 19-22) acknowledged God's identity and past redemptive acts yet lacked genuine repentance: they wanted relief without reformation, blessing without obedience, divine favor without covenant faithfulness. God's response (vv. 10-12) rejected their shallow repentance: "They have loved to wander, they have not refrained their feet, therefore the LORD doth not accept them; he will now remember their iniquity, and visit their sins...Though they fast, I will not hear their cry; and though they offer burnt offering and an oblation, I will not accept them: but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence."

Church fathers and Reformers applied this passage to spiritual drought in the church. Augustine used agricultural imagery for spiritual barrenness resulting from sin. Calvin's commentary emphasized that God controls nature to discipline covenant unfaithfulness, warning that church's spiritual sterility invites divine judgment. Puritan preachers connected drought with spiritual dryness: as land

needs rain, souls need grace; as drought produces cracked ground, sin produces hardened hearts; as farmers cover heads in shame, sinners should humble themselves before God. Modern application recognizes that while New Covenant believers aren't under theocratic covenant curses (no direct equation between individual sin and natural disaster), the principle remains: persistent, unrepentant sin leads to spiritual barrenness, loss of joy and fruitfulness, and ultimately divine discipline (Hebrews 12:5-11).

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. What areas of spiritual barrenness or 'cracked ground' in your life might indicate that you've wandered from close fellowship with God and need His 'rain' of grace and presence?
2. How does Judah's experience of crying out to God for relief while refusing genuine repentance mirror any patterns in your own prayer life or relationship with God?
3. In what ways might you be seeking God's blessings or answers to prayer while simultaneously harboring 'idols'—things you trust, love, or prioritize above Him?
4. What would authentic repentance and 'turning from sin' look like specifically in areas where you've experienced spiritual dryness, loss of joy, or distance from God?
5. How does understanding that God sometimes withholds blessing to expose false dependencies and provoke genuine repentance change your perspective on current difficulties or 'droughts' in your life?

Interlinear Text

וְרַעַב	בָּאָדָמָה	לֹא	כִּי	מִתְהָ	בְּאָדָמָה	בְּנֵי הָרָאָה	בְּנֵי שָׁמָן
H5668	Because the ground	is chapt	H3588	H3808	H1961	for there was no rain	
	H127	H2865				H1653	

Additional Cross-References

Joel 1:11 (Parallel theme): Be ye ashamed, O ye husbandmen; howl, O ye vinedressers, for the wheat and for the barley; because the harvest of the field is perished.

Jeremiah 3:3 (Parallel theme): Therefore the showers have been withheld, and there hath been no latter rain; and thou hadst a whore's forehead, thou refusedst to be ashamed.

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