

Jeremiah 34:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But afterward they turned, and caused the servants and the handmaids, whom they had let go free, to return, and brought them into subjection for servants and for handmaids.

Analysis

But afterward they turned, and caused the servants and the handmaids, whom they had let go free, to return, and brought them into subjection for servants and for handmaids. The conjunction **But afterward** (vayashuvu acharei-khen) marks the tragic reversal: "they turned back." The verb shuv (turn/return) frequently describes repentance in Scripture (turning from sin to God), but here describes the opposite—turning from brief obedience back to sin. This demonstrates false repentance's pattern: temporary reformation followed by reversion to previous patterns.

The phrase **caused... to return** indicates active recapture—the freed servants didn't voluntarily return but were forcibly re-enslaved. The verb "brought them into subjection" (vayakhbishum) derives from kavash (subdue, bring into bondage), used of military conquest. This language reveals the violence of re-enslavement: former servants who tasted freedom were violently forced back into servitude. The repetition "servants... handmaids" emphasizes comprehensiveness—every freed person was recaptured.

Theologically, this verse teaches:

1. Incomplete repentance insults God more than honest unbelief
2. tasting freedom then returning to bondage illustrates spiritual apostasy (2 Peter 2:20-22)

3. oppression of the vulnerable especially provokes divine wrath
4. human hearts apart from regenerating grace inevitably revert to sin.

The passage anticipates Christ's warning about the unclean spirit returning with seven others (Matthew 12:43-45)—temporary reformation without transformation leads to worse condition than before.

Historical Context

The recapture occurred when Egyptian intervention temporarily lifted Babylon's siege (Jeremiah 37:5). The brief military reprieve gave false confidence that deliverance was achieved, making continued covenant obedience seem unnecessary. This illustrates the dangerous pattern: crisis prompts religious observance, relief produces backsliding. The historical consequence was immediate: Jeremiah prophesied resumed siege and total destruction (verses 21-22), which occurred exactly as predicted. The Babylonians returned, besieged Jerusalem for 18 months, breached the walls in 586 BCE, and burned the city (2 Kings 25:1-10). This historical sequence demonstrates that God's word proves absolutely reliable while human calculations and temporary circumstances prove worthless—those who recaptured servants seeking economic advantage lost everything in Jerusalem's destruction.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does the pattern of crisis-driven reform followed by backsliding when pressure lifts appear in contemporary Christian experience?
2. What spiritual parallels exist between re-enslaving freed servants and believers returning to bondage to sin after experiencing gospel freedom?

3. How can Christian communities guard against temporary enthusiasm that evaporates when circumstances change, ensuring genuine transformation rather than mere external compliance?

Interlinear Text

וְאַתָּה לְעָבֵד יְמִינְךָ וְאַתָּה לְעָבֵד יְמִינְךָ
they turned But afterward H3651 they turned H853 and caused the servants H853
H7725 H310 H7725 H5650

וְאַתָּה לְשִׁפְחוֹתִים אֲשֶׁר נָשָׁלְחוּ וְאַתָּה לְשִׁפְחוֹתִים
and for handmaids H834 whom they had let go free H2670
H8198 H7971 H2670

וְאַתָּה לְעָבֵד יְמִינְךָ וְאַתָּה לְעָבֵד יְמִינְךָ וְאַתָּה לְשִׁפְחוֹתִים
and brought them into subjection H3533 and caused the servants H5650 and for handmaids H8198

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 26:11 (Parallel theme): As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly.

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