

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

וַיִּשָּׁבּוּ בוֹ	אַחֲרָי	כִּי	וַיִּשָּׁבּוּ בוֹ	אֶת	לְעֶבְדֵי יְיָ	וְאֶת
they turned	But afterward	H3651	they turned	H853	and caused the servants	H853
H7725	H310		H7725		H5650	
וְלִשְׁפָחוֹת:	אֲשֶׁר	שָׁלַח וְ	חֲפֹשִׁי יְיָ			
and for handmaids	H834	whom they had let go	free			
H8198		H7971	H2670			
וַיְבִיֵּשׁ וְ	לְעֶבְדֵי יְיָ	וְלִשְׁפָחוֹת:				
and brought them into subjection	and caused the servants	and for handmaids				
H3533	H5650	H8198				

Additional Cross-References

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