

Homiletics Analysis: Jeremiah 24

Content & Intent

Broader Unit — Component of Jeremiah's Prophetic Corpus (Jeremiah 21–29)

Jeremiah 24 sits within a larger section of the book (roughly chapters 21–29) where Jeremiah is engaged in sustained controversy with false prophets, unfaithful kings, and a people who persistently misread their own spiritual condition. The broader unit's claim is that the LORD alone — not political calculation, not institutional religion, not prophetic consensus — determines Israel's destiny, and that He is working an unexpected redemptive purpose through historical events that appear catastrophic. Jeremiah 24 contributes a sharp and specific claim to that broader movement: the theological meaning of the first deportation (597 BC) is the opposite of what Jerusalem's remaining population assumed.

This Text — Content

The vision opens after the first deportation under Nebuchadnezzar (597 BC), which had carried Jeconiah (Jehoiachin), the princes, the craftsmen, and the smiths into Babylon. The LORD shows Jeremiah two baskets of figs placed before the temple — one basket of very good figs, first-ripe and excellent; the other basket of very bad figs, too rotten to eat. When asked what he sees, Jeremiah describes both. The LORD then provides the interpretation: the good figs represent those who have gone into Babylonian exile — Judah's deportees. God will watch over them for good, bring them back to this land, build them up, plant them, give them a heart to know Him, and establish the covenant relationship: “they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.” The bad figs represent Zedekiah and his officials, those who remained in Jerusalem, and those who had gone to Egypt — those who, whether through royal power or flight, had escaped or avoided Babylon. Upon these God pronounces comprehensive judgment: sword, famine, pestilence, and becoming a horror, a curse, and a reproach among all the nations.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking to accomplish a complete theological inversion in the minds of His people. The natural, human, religious assumption was that those remaining in Jerusalem — still in the land, still near the temple, still under the Davidic king — were the elect remnant, the preserved community, the ones God was protecting. The deportees, by contrast, appeared to be the judged, the abandoned, the cursed. Jeremiah 24 tears that assumption apart. God reverses the apparent verdict: the exiles are the good figs — the ones God is working with, watching over, and through whom He will fulfill His covenant purposes. The remainers are the bad figs — not preserved but merely deferred in their judgment. God's intent is not simply to correct a misunderstanding but to reorient His people's entire

framework for reading providence: God's favor is not readable from visible circumstances, and apparent loss may be the very place God is working most decisively. The deeper intent is to generate hope in the exiles that their displacement is not abandonment, and to strip false security from those who remain.

Subject Sentence: The LORD identifies the Babylonian exiles — not Jerusalem's remnant — as His chosen vessels for covenant renewal.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to abandon every circumstantial reading of His favor and to trust that He is working His covenant purposes precisely through the suffering and displacement that looks like abandonment — so that the exiles receive hope, and the self-secure receive warning.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Identification of the “Good Figs”

The most significant interpretive question concerns what the good figs represent theologically. Some popular and pastoral readings spiritualize the distinction too quickly, treating the good figs as personally more righteous or more repentant individuals, and the bad figs as individuals who were more sinful or apostate. This is a misreading. The text makes no claim about the personal moral condition of the deportees compared to the remainers. The distinction is entirely about God's sovereign elective purpose — whom God has chosen as the vessel of His redemptive plan going forward. The good figs are not good because of their virtue; they are good because God has sovereignly designated them as the vehicle of covenant renewal. This is a critical Reformed exegetical point: the passage teaches not that God rewards the righteous remnant but that God elects a people and works through them in ways that defy surface-level evaluation.

The New Heart Promise (v. 7)

Verse 7 — “I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart” — generates significant interpretive divergence.

Arminian/Wesleyan reading: The new heart is given in response to (or in anticipation of) the people's own return with their whole heart. The verse is read as a conditional promise: God gives the heart *because* they return. This reading maintains human initiative in repentance as the ground for divine enablement.

Reformed reading: The syntax and parallels (especially Ezekiel 36:26–27 and Jeremiah 31:31–34) indicate that the new heart is the *cause*, not the *consequence*, of their return.

God gives the heart to know Him, and the result is that they return. The final clause (“for they shall return”) is best read as expressing the consequence of the gift, not the condition for it. The verbal flow in the Hebrew supports this: the LORD *gives* the heart, and this giving issues in their return. This is entirely consistent with the broader Jeremican and Deuteronomistic theology that the problem is precisely that Israel *cannot* return on her own — her heart is the organ of failure (Jer. 17:9) — and therefore the new heart must be a divine gift, not a divine response.

The Arminian reading deserves acknowledgment of its pastoral instinct — it takes seriously the call to return that runs throughout Jeremiah — but the text does not ground the heart-gift in prior human return. The Reformed reading better accounts for the passage’s own diagnosis of the problem and its resolution.

Dispensational Reading

Dispensational interpreters often read Jeremiah 24 as a straightforward prediction with exclusive reference to national Israel’s future regathering, and the “good figs” as the faithful remnant that will return to the land in the eschaton. The near-term fulfillment (post-exilic return under Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah) and the ultimate spiritual fulfillment (the new covenant of verse 7) are treated as distinct events in a prophetic timetable. The observation that there are multiple layers of fulfillment is legitimate and worth retaining. However, the Dispensational tendency to restrict this passage exclusively to national-geographic restoration loses the spiritual core: the new heart promise of verse 7 is the passage’s climactic claim, and its fulfillment is most fully realized in the new covenant work of the Spirit (as Jeremiah himself develops in chapter 31 and as Ezekiel picks up in chapter 36). The passage is not primarily about real estate but about covenant relationship — “they shall be my people and I will be their God.”

No significant additional divergence exists among orthodox traditions on the core structure of the passage. The vision form, the two-basket comparison, and the identification of good/bad figs with the exiles/remainers are broadly agreed upon across traditions.

Key Canonical Support

- **Jeremiah 29:4–7, 11–14** — God’s letter to the exiles in Babylon: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile... For I know the plans I have for you... plans for welfare and not for evil.” Directly corroborates Jeremiah 24’s claim that exile is the place of God’s purposeful working, not His abandonment.
- **Jeremiah 31:31–34** — The New Covenant promise: God will put His law within His people and write it on their hearts. Verse 7’s new heart promise finds its fullest OT development here; the two passages are closely linked as Jeremiah’s twin peaks of covenantal hope.

- **Ezekiel 36:24–28** — “I will give you a new heart... I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes.” The most direct canonical parallel to Jeremiah 24:7; together these passages establish that the heart-gift is divine initiative, not human precondition.
- **Romans 9:6–8** — “Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.” Paul’s argument that God’s elective purpose always distinguished within the visible community of covenant people is the New Testament theological elaboration of the logic Jeremiah 24 enacts — the apparent insiders (Jerusalem’s remaining population) are not the covenant community; God’s sovereign election determines the true community.
- **1 Peter 1:6–7; 2:9–10** — Peter addresses exiles and sojourners, calling them a chosen people and a holy nation, and grounds hope in suffering in God’s elective purpose. The logic mirrors Jeremiah 24: displacement and exile are reinterpreted as the very location of God’s forming work.

Aim: To show that God’s covenant purposes are advanced not through visible prosperity and apparent preservation but through sovereign grace working in and through suffering — so that the hearer abandons false security, receives genuine hope, and rests in God’s elective faithfulness rather than in circumstantial evidence of blessing.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1a	Historical superscription: after Nebuchadnezzar deported Jeconiah, the officials, craftsmen, and smiths from Jerusalem to Babylon	Sets the post-597 BC context; the first deportation has already occurred
1b	The LORD shows Jeremiah two baskets of figs placed before the temple	Vision form; temple placement is significant — this concerns covenant worship and community
2	First basket: very good figs, like first-ripe figs; second basket: very bad figs, too rotten to eat	The contrast is absolute — excellent vs. uneatable; no middle category
3	The LORD asks Jeremiah what he sees; Jeremiah	Standard vision-interrogation pattern

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	describes both baskets	(cf. Amos 8, Zechariah 1–6); draws Jeremiah — and reader — into active interpretation
4–5	The LORD’s interpretation of the good figs: they represent the exiles of Judah whom God has sent away to Babylon; God will “regard as good” the exiles	Critical: God sent them — exile is not abandonment but divine action; “regard as good” is the LORD’s own evaluative verdict
6	God’s promise to the good figs: He will set His eyes on them for good, bring them back to this land, build them up and not tear them down, plant them and not uproot them	Language echoes Jeremiah’s commission (1:10) — the verbs of tearing down and planting now applied to the exiles’ restoration
7	The climax: God will give them a heart to know Him; covenant formula — “they shall be my people and I will be their God”; grounded in their whole-hearted return	New heart as divine gift; covenant formula is the deepest level of promise; signals eschatological/new covenant horizon
8	The LORD’s interpretation of the bad figs: Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials, the survivors in Jerusalem, and those who dwell in Egypt	Three groups: Jerusalem’s court, Jerusalem’s population, and those who fled to Egypt — all “bad fig” categories
9	God’s judgment on the bad figs: He will make them a horror and an evil to all the kingdoms of the earth; a taunt, a byword, a curse, and a reproach wherever He drives them	The horror/curse language is the inverse of the covenant blessing formula — covenant curse language
10	God will send sword, famine, and pestilence until they are utterly destroyed from the land He gave them	The classic triad of covenant judgment (Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 28); “the land He gave them” — the gift given becomes the land from which they are expelled

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1	Historical and Visionary Setting — Two Baskets Before the Temple
2	2–3	The Vision Described and Interrogated — The Contrast Stated
3	4–7	The Good Figs Interpreted — Exile as the Place of God’s Purposeful Grace
4	8–10	The Bad Figs Interpreted — Apparent Preservation as Deferred Judgment

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD identifies the Babylonian exiles — not Jerusalem’s remnant — as His chosen vessels for covenant renewal.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to abandon every circumstantial reading of His favor and to trust that He is working His covenant purposes precisely through the suffering and displacement that looks like abandonment — so that the exiles receive hope, and the self-secure receive warning.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Reframe how you read God’s presence in suffering. The Jerusalem population read their continued presence in the land as evidence of God’s favor and the deportees’ exile as evidence of God’s rejection. They were completely wrong. The passage demands a radical cognitive reorientation: visible prosperity, institutional stability, and apparent escape from difficulty are not reliable indicators of God’s covenantal favor. The exiles — stripped of land, temple, and king — were the ones God was watching over, working with, and building toward covenant renewal. If you have been reading your hardships as evidence that God has abandoned you, or reading your comforts as evidence that God has blessed you, Jeremiah 24 dismantles both equations. God’s favor is not readable from your circumstances.

2. [Affections/Worship] — Receive the exile of verse 7 as a word of mercy, not merely information. The promise of a new heart — “I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD” — is not a reward for Israel’s faithfulness but a gift given to a people whose old heart was the precise source of their failure. God knows what you are working with. He knows the heart you bring to Him is the heart that wanders, forgets, and turns to false securities. The promise of verse 7 should produce not congratulation but gratitude — deep, worshipful relief that the covenant does not rest on your heart’s performance but on God’s promise to remake it. Worship the God who gives the heart He requires, rather than requiring a heart you cannot produce.

3. [Will/Behavior] — Stop deriving your sense of security from your social or institutional position within the visible church. Zedekiah was king. He sat on David’s throne, in David’s city, near Solomon’s temple. He had every external marker of covenant membership. He was a bad fig. The lesson is not that institutional religion is worthless, but that belonging to the right institution, holding the right position, or retaining the right appearances can generate a false security that is more dangerous than acknowledged lostness. Concretely: stop measuring your spiritual condition by your church attendance, your theological knowledge, your family heritage, or your reputation in the community. Ask instead whether you have received the heart of verse 7 — a heart that actually *knows* the LORD, not merely knows about Him.

4. [Mind/Belief] — Understand that God’s elective purposes often run through the community that looks abandoned, not the community that looks established. The pattern of Jeremiah 24 recurs across the whole canon: the younger over the elder, the barren over the fruitful, the exiles over the enthroned, the crucified Messiah over the powerful Sanhedrin. God’s sovereign election consistently chooses the path that confounds human calculations of strength, status, and security. This is not a general inspirational principle about underdogs — it is a specific theological claim about how the covenant God works. When you encounter Christians who appear marginal, stripped of cultural power, or suffering, resist the assumption that their condition reflects God’s disfavor. It may be precisely in that community that God is doing His most decisive covenant work.

5. [Affections/Worship] — Let the covenant formula of verse 7 become the ground of your hope, not the horizon of your aspiration. “They shall be my people and I will be their God” — this is not a goal Israel is reaching toward through spiritual improvement. It is a promise God is enacting through sovereign grace. The covenant formula appears at the climax of the good-fig promise because it is the destination of all God’s work with His people — the full restoration of the relationship that sin fractured. For the Christian, this promise has been secured in Christ, the true faithful Israel, whose exile and return (cross and resurrection) are the ultimate fulfillment of the Jeremiah 24 pattern. Rest in the covenant as accomplished, not merely promised. Let that rest produce the kind of whole-hearted return described in verse 7 — not as the condition you must meet, but as the fruit of the heart God has given.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Jeremiah 24 teaches with unusual sharpness that God's sovereignty operates in ways that systematically invert human assessments of His favor. God is the one who acts — He sends the exiles (v. 5), He sets His eyes on them (v. 6), He gives the heart (v. 7), He brings them back (v. 6), and He sends sword, famine, and pestilence on the remainers (v. 10). The entire passage is governed by divine initiative and divine interpretation: human circumstances are not self-interpreting, and only the word of the LORD reliably identifies what God is doing in history. This also establishes a pattern for understanding divine judgment: apparent escape from judgment (Zedekiah remaining on his throne, refugees sheltering in Egypt) is not safety — it is the prolongation of a condition that issues in worse judgment. Most importantly, verse 7 places the new heart — the transformed organ of knowing and returning to God — entirely within the domain of divine gift, establishing that covenant renewal is achieved not by human striving but by divine grace that creates the response it requires.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Jeremiah 24 is a preeminent OT text for the Reformed doctrine of sovereign election and effectual grace. The good-fig/bad-fig distinction is not drawn on the basis of the deportees' superior righteousness, greater repentance, or more faithful response — it is drawn entirely by God's sovereign designation: "I will regard as good the exiles from Judah" (v. 5). The new heart promise of verse 7 anticipates and grounds the Reformed understanding of regeneration as logically prior to faith and repentance: God gives the heart that knows Him, and the consequence is their wholehearted return. This is not Pelagianism dressed in covenantal language — it is the irreversible logic that Jeremiah 17:9 demands: since the heart is deceitful and desperately sick, the only hope is a heart God Himself provides. The passage also models the Reformed hermeneutic of reading all divine covenantal action through the lens of grace — the exiles deserved no better than their deported condition, yet God singles them out as the vessel of His ongoing redemptive purpose, foreshadowing the New Testament pattern in which the crucified remnant becomes the Spirit-indwelt new covenant community.

Main Takeaway

God is not where you think He is — and He is working on people you have written off. The exiles looked abandoned; they were the ones God was building toward covenant renewal. The Jerusalem court looked secure; they were the ones under deferred judgment. Stop reading God's presence or absence from your circumstances, your position, or your apparent safety. And receive verse 7 as the deepest word in the chapter: the God who

requires a whole heart is the same God who gives the heart He requires. That is not a demand you must meet — it is a mercy you must receive.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Moralizing the distinction between good figs and bad figs.** The most common mishandling of this passage is treating the good figs as morally superior individuals — more repentant, more faithful, more righteous than those who remained. The text makes no such claim. The distinction is entirely God’s sovereign designation, not a reward for human virtue. A sermon that says “God blessed the exiles because they were more faithful” has inverted the passage’s logic and produced moralism out of a passage designed to proclaim grace. The good figs are good because God says so — which should humble the hearer, not generate a merit-based comparison.
- **Missing the theological inversion as the passage’s governing move.** The entire force of Jeremiah 24 depends on the audience’s assumption being completely wrong. If the preacher does not first establish what Jerusalem’s population would have assumed — that the deportees were the judged and the remainers were the preserved — the passage’s claim has no teeth. The shock of the reversal is the point. Flatten the assumption and you flatten the message.
- **Preaching verse 7 as a conditional promise (“if you return, God will give you a new heart”).** This is an exegetically defensible surface reading but misses the causative structure of the promise and contradicts the passage’s own logic. If the exiles could return with their whole heart on their own, the new heart would be unnecessary. The heart-gift is the cause of the return, not its reward. Preaching it conditionally produces a works-response to a grace-declaration and fails to connect with the New Covenant and regeneration framework that this verse is clearly anticipating.
- **Limiting the application to Israel’s national-historical circumstances without moving to the passage’s redemptive-historical and personal dimensions.** Jeremiah 24 is not merely a historical annotation about the 597 BC deportation. It is a paradigmatic statement about how God works — through apparent loss, through displacement, through the community that looks like the least likely vessel. The new heart promise (v. 7) explicitly reaches beyond 597 BC into new covenant territory. A sermon that stops at historical description without moving to the transforming claim has done archaeology, not exposition.
- **Using the bad figs as a platform for anti-institutional preaching without handling the judgment theme pastorally.** Zedekiah’s judgment is real and severe, but the passage does not invite the preacher to score points against established institutions, comfortable Christianity, or nominal churchgoers. The purpose of the bad-fig section is to strip false security, not to generate contempt. The tone should

be urgent and sobering — the kind of alarm you sound when someone is in danger — not triumphalist or dismissive of those who appear religiously comfortable.

- **Failing to connect verse 7 to the New Covenant fulfillment in Christ.** Verse 7's new heart promise is one of the OT's most explicit anticipations of the Spirit's regenerating work in the new covenant age. A sermon that reads this as a promise about Israel's post-exilic reformation without connecting it to Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, and the New Testament theology of regeneration has preached from the shadow without pointing to the substance. The passage's intent — generating genuine hope grounded in God's own transforming work — is only fully accessible when the preacher traces the promise to its fulfillment in the Spirit's new covenant ministry.