

Back to Egypt

by Ray C. Stedman

In our last study we saw Jeremiah's description of the fall of Jerusalem to the armies of Babylon, an event which had hovered on the horizon of his ministry throughout his life. God had delayed that judgment while Jeremiah ministered to this people, seeking to turn them about, seeking to prevent, if he could, the death of this nation. God's patience is evident in this book, because it was forty years before the judgment he had announced finally came. If we were to transfer that to the twentieth century, and 1974 were the year that the nation fell, Jeremiah's ministry would have begun back in 1934, when I was in high school, and he would have been preaching all these intervening years. This shows us how patiently God had dealt with his people.

But now Jerusalem has fallen. As we saw in Chapter 39, "in the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, a breach was made in the city." The Babylonian armies poured into the city, overthrew it, captured the palace and burned it to the ground, captured the temple, burned it to the ground, took the king captive, put out his eyes, and led him away to Babylon. And Jeremiah was freed from his prison house.

In Chapters 40-45 we have the account of what happened in the nation after the destruction of Jerusalem. One would think the overthrow of the city would be enough to turn the hearts of the people back to God. But not so. This people had not yet reached bottom. In our study today we will see how they are led by the deceitfulness of the flesh into that place of utter and insolent rebellion against God which marked the very nadir of their downfall.

This is a very instructive lesson for all of us. Remember that the New Testament tells us all these stories in the Old Testament happened for our instruction, in order that we might learn something about ourselves. Although it is history, it is not merely so. There is a double meaning in these Old Testament stories. They are vivid descriptions of what is going on in our own lives, as we have seen many times. Therefore today we will learn something more about the nature and functioning of that strange tendency toward evil within each of us called in the Bible "the flesh" -- the old life, the inherent Adamic nature. One of the most important things we can learn as Christians is how to recognize the flesh. Remember the verse back in the seventeenth chapter of Jeremiah which probably is the most often -- quoted in this book, Jeremiah 17:9:

**The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately corrupt;
who can understand it? {Jer 17:9 RSV}**

These chapters are a great commentary on that verse, on the deceitfulness of the heart -- how it works to fool us and deceive us and mislead us. This account is a story of the flesh at work. And it will drive us to an awareness that only by trust in the living God can we ever hope to overcome the deceitfulness of the flesh. As we go through it I want simply to point out the various forms the flesh takes and the ways in which it operates to deceive us. We will find them reflected in our own natures.

In Chapter 40 we have the account of Jeremiah's experience after the capture of Jerusalem. He is freed by Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard under Nebuchadnezzar, and given his choice as to where to live. He can go to Babylon, and there be treated with honor and respect, or he can stay in the land. Jeremiah chooses to stay in the land and to associate himself with Gedaliah, the governor appointed by the king of Babylon to rule over this nation. Verse 6:

**Then Jeremiah went to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, at Mizpah, and dwelt with him
among the people who were left in the land. {Jer 40:6 RSV}**

Then the account tells us there were still unsubdued Judean warriors who gathered themselves into roving

guerrilla bands under various captains -- Ishmael, Johanan, Seraiah, and Jezaniah. They came to Gedaliah at Mizpah, who told them that if they would but submit to the government of Babylon, God would bless them and give them peace in the land. But they were rebellious, refused to do this, and continued their guerrilla warfare against Babylon. In Verses 13-16 we have an incident that is instructive to us:

Now Johanan the son of Kareah and all the leaders of the forces in the open country came to Gedaliah at Mizpah and said to him, "Do you know that Baalis the king of the Ammonites has sent Ishmael the son of Nethaniah to take your life?" But Gedaliah the son of Ahikam would not believe them. Then Johanan the son of Kareah spoke secretly to Gedaliah at Mizpah, "Let me go and slay Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, and no one will know it. Why should he take your life, so that all the Jews who are gathered about you would be scattered, and the remnant of Judah would perish?" But Gedaliah the son of Ahikam said to Johanan the son of Kareah, "You shall not do this thing, for you are speaking falsely of Ishmael." {Jer 40:13-16 RSV}

Here is one of the most subtle manifestations of the old nature within us -- its tendency to be trustful of everybody, without discrimination. The Scriptures make clear that it is wrong for us always to be suspicious of people. If you are the kind of person who never trusts anybody, who always is defensive and suspicious, this is a serious weakness that will get you in a great deal of trouble. But on the other hand, to be naive and ingenuous, to believe everyone who comes along, is also a weakness.

As we have seen many times in studying the Scriptures, the devil sends error into the world in pairs which are opposites -- as far apart from each other as it is possible to get -- and yet both are aspects of the same error. Satan's trick is to try to get you to flee from one aspect so that you will fall into the other. He does this all the time. The course of the Christian must be a narrow, fence-balancing walk right between the extremes. It is difficult to maintain, except as you walk with God. Only he has the wisdom to do this.

Here we find a man who is naive, who believes everyone, who has an undiscerning trust, and he will not believe this threat against his life. This so often happens. Yet the man who tries to warn him also has a flaw in his character. His way of correcting this situation is to take a secret vengeance upon Ishmael. If Gedaliah had been aware of the meaning of names, he would have been tipped off by the name Ishmael. Ishmael was the name of the brother of Isaac. The New Testament calls him a picture of the man of the flesh, the man who cannot be trusted. All the men in Scripture who bear this name are always of this character. This Ishmael has been bribed by the king of the Ammonites to take the life of Gedaliah. But Gedaliah is trusting, and never tests the spirits, as God tells us to do, to see which is of God and which is not. And so he refuses to believe this of Ishmael, and it costs him his life, as we will see.

But Johanan wants to take vengeance by quietly going to Ishmael and murdering him in secret. This again is a manifestation of the flesh, that feeling that somehow, without people finding out, we can get by with doing the wrong thing for the right motive. Is that not the story of Watergate? How many of us have trembled as we have read the account of Watergate and wondered, "Would I have done any differently if I were there?" That is what the fellows who were involved in it are saying: "We didn't realize what we were getting into. We thought it was right!" That is the terrible, deadly danger of the flesh that deceives us, makes us think a thing is right when it really is wrong, though we do not realize it.

This man wanted to take a secret vengeance. I find a lot of people doing that today. Every now and then I get letters which just take me apart, blister me, list all my faults -- and, of course, the discouraging thing about it is that the writers are always right! When I get one I read it through and think, "Well, this person has misunderstood certain things. I'll just write him a note and explain the truth about those things, and everything will be all right." Then I get to the end, and there is no signature -- it is merely another anonymous note. I have learned to treat them with disdain, because an anonymous note is a way of striking at somebody secretly without letting the person know who you are, without having enough of the courage of your convictions to sign what you write.

In Chapter 41 we have the sequel to this:

In the seventh month, Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, son of Elishama, of the royal family, one of the chief officers of the king, came with ten men to Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, at Mizpah. As they ate bread together there at Mizpah, Ishmael the son of Nethaniah and the ten men with him rose up and struck down Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, with the sword, and killed him, whom the king of Babylon had appointed governor in the land. Ishmael also slew all the Jews who were with Gedaliah at Mizpah, and the Chaldean soldiers who happened to be there. {Jer 41:1-3 RSV}

This is a bloody account, an account of treachery, of jealousy. Ishmael was of the royal family, one of the chief officers of the king. Perhaps that accounts for his jealousy of the man who, though of humble origin, had been appointed governor of the land. So in a scene of apparent harmony, while they were eating bread together, he rises and smites him with the sword and kills him -- and not only Gedaliah but all the others who were with him in the palace at Mizpah. This is a picture of treachery and murder. Is it not strange that this can lie hidden in our hearts? Any time we get angry and upset we feel this same kind of murderous rage within. At that moment, given the opportunity, if we felt that nothing bad would result to us, we would probably take somebody's life. Because that is exactly what hate is. Hating a brother is murder, the Scriptures say. This is the character of the flesh we live with. When Cain was disappointed that God had rejected his offering, God warned him: "Sin is crouching at the door, like a lion ready to spring on you and drive you into something that is worse," {cf, Gen 4:7}. Cain did not heed that warning, and went on to murder his brother. This passage reveals what is down deep in each one of our hearts. I remember a tragic instance here in this area many years ago of a pastor's son who grew up to be a criminal, and finally, coming home one day in a fit of murderous rage, slew his own mother. This is possible for any of us, given the right circumstance, because this is the nature of the flesh within us.

As we read on, the account gets worse. This man Ishmael trapped eighty men who arrived in Mizpah bringing their offerings. He slew them and filled a cistern with their bodies. Then he took captive the rest of the inhabitants of Mizpah, including Jeremiah, intending to deliver them to the Ammonites. But the forces led by Johanan the son of Kareah rescued them. We pick up the account at Verse 16:

Then Johanan the son of Kareah and all the leaders of the forces with him took all the rest of the people whom Ishmael the son of Nethaniah had carried away captive from Mizpah after he had slain Gedaliah the son of Ahikam -- soldiers, women, children, and eunuchs, whom Johanan brought back from Gibeon. And they went and stayed at Geruth Chimham near Bethlehem, intending to go to Egypt because of the Chaldeans; for they were afraid of them, because Ishmael the son of Nethaniah had slain Gedaliah the son of Ahikam, whom the king of Babylon had made governor over the land. {Jer 41:16-18 RSV}

That is strange! These people were fleeing from the Babylonians. Yet it was the Babylonians who had appointed Gedaliah governor over the land, and they would have avenged his death. These men, who were not involved in this murder, had no reason to fear the Babylonians. But they fled from them nevertheless. Again, this is a picture of what the evil heart within us does to us. It makes us afraid of that which we need not fear.

Unreasonable fear comes to us, we begin to fear all kinds of things. Proverbs says, "The wicked flee when no man pursues," {cf, Prov 28:1}. This is true. Here are men whose consciences are not yet fully right before God. And so, though they have not been involved in these murders, nevertheless they flee, and all the people with them, down to Egypt where they had no business to go.

Our hearts are oftentimes given over to this kind of unjustified fear. My mind goes back to the days when I was in the Navy in Hawaii. We had an Italian barber at the naval base whom we all enjoyed taking to the movies because he got so involved emotionally in the story that he would get carried away and do all kinds of strange things. We enjoyed watching him instead of the movie! If a villain started to attack some innocent person, he would jump up and shake his fist, and everybody in the house would start laughing at him. On one occasion something frightening was happening on the screen, and he suddenly leaped from his seat and ran out of the theater, crying out in fear. This is what I thought of when I read this account -- of running from shadows on a screen. Have you ever done that? You know, when the heart is not right, everything looks threatening, and anxieties grip you. You are afraid, fearful of anything, everything, troubled all the time by a

foreboding sense of impending disaster. That is the work of the flesh within us.

In Chapter 42 we read on:

Then all the commanders of the forces, and Johanan the son of Kareah and Azariah the son of Hoshai, and all the people from the least to the greatest, came near and said to Jeremiah the prophet, "Let our supplication come before you, and pray to the Lord your God for us, for all this remnant (for we are left but a few of many, as your eyes see us), that the Lord your God may show us the way we should go, and the thing that we should do." Jeremiah the prophet said to them, "I have heard you; behold, I will pray to the Lord your God according to your request, and whatever the Lord answers you I will tell you; I will keep nothing back from you." Then they said to Jeremiah, "May the Lord be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act according to all the word which the Lord your God sends you to us. Whether it is good or evil, we will obey the voice of the Lord our God to whom we are sending you, that it may be well with us when we obey the voice of the Lord our God." {Jer 42:1-6 RSV}

Well, it looks as if they are straightening out, does it not? At last they are doing the right thing, coming to Jeremiah and saying, "Is it right to go to Egypt?" Now, they knew it was not, because the Scriptures had always said that Israel was never to go back to Egypt -- never. "Woe unto them that trust in Egypt," Isaiah said. And yet here they are on their way. So they come, as so many Christians do, wanting to find a scriptural way to disobey God. They tell Jeremiah the prophet, "You go and ask God whether it's right for us to do this or not. And whatever he tells you, we'll do it."

Notice a revealing detail in their phraseology. In Verses 2-3 they say, "Let our supplication come before you, and pray to the Lord Your God for us...that the Lord your God may show us the way we should go..." There is a sense of distance from God already. But Jeremiah will have nothing of this. He says, "I have heard you; behold, I will pray to the Lord God according to your request, and whatever the Lord answers You I will tell you..." He refuses to be a middle man, a mediator, but insists that they deal directly with God himself. And he goes to the Lord with this request of theirs.

So their words sound good, but their hearts are wrong, as subsequent events prove. They knew this was wrong, and yet they wanted somehow to twist God to justify their actions, so they clothe them with these pious words. That again is a manifestation of the flesh. The flesh can be extremely religious. It loves to sing in the choir, to usher, to preach messages, and to do all kinds of religious things -- as long as it can have an evil heart of unbelief. That is what these people had.

I have long ago learned that when people start talking to me of "the good Lord," it is time to get suspicious immediately. That phrase is usually used by the world, and often by carnal Christians, when they want to talk about God. They call him "the good Lord." Now, this is not true of everyone who uses the phrase, and I do not want to stigmatize anyone who does. But I get suspicious when I hear it because I know that those who know God usually do not call him "the good Lord," but just "the Lord."

Here is the reply they get, Verse 7:

At the end of ten days the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. Then he summoned Johanan the son of Kareah and all the commanders of the forces who were with him, and all the people from the least to the greatest [God made these people wait in the waiting room for ten days, cooling their heels, before he gave Jeremiah the answer], and said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your supplication before him: If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I repent of the evil which I did to you. Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid; do not fear him, says the Lord, for I am with you, to save you and to deliver you from his hand. I will grant you mercy, that he may have mercy on you and let you remain in your own land. [They had nothing to fear if they would obey God.] But if you say, 'We will not remain in this land,' disobeying the voice of the Lord your God and saying, 'No, we will go to the

land of Egypt, where we shall not see war, or hear the sound of the trumpet, or be hungry for bread, and we will dwell there,' then hear the word of the Lord, O remnant of Judah." {Jer 42:7-15a RSV}

Do you see how thoroughly God knew their hearts? He knew what they were saying in their inner hearts: "Ah, down in Egypt we'll have no trouble. If we go to Egypt, everything's going to be fine. There will be no famine in Egypt, no war in Egypt, no draft, no drills. Everything will be fine in Egypt." This is another characteristic of the flesh. It not only arouses within us these unreasoning fears, but it also leads us to trust in baseless hopes, to imagine that "everything's going to be all right" in some place other than that of God's choosing.

Is it not amazing how we succumb to this? What were they running from down to Egypt? The sword, famine, and pestilence. What did God say they would find when they got to Egypt? The sword, famine, pestilence. You see, you cannot run away from God. You bring your troubles with you. You cannot run to some other place and escape. Some change of scenery is not going to relieve you, because the problem is within. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?" The chapter goes on to affirm how God, with a certainty, will bring this judgment on them. Chapter 43 continues the account:

When Jeremiah finished speaking to all the people all these words of the Lord their God, with which the Lord their God had sent him to them, Azariah the son of Hoshaiiah and Johanan the son of Kareah and all the insolent men said to Jeremiah, "You are telling a lie. The Lord our God did not send you to say, 'Do not go to Egypt to live there', but Baruch the son of Neriah has set you against us, to deliver us into the hand of the Chaldeans, that they may kill us or take us into exile in Babylon." So Johanan the son of Kareah and all the commanders of the forces and all the people did not obey the voice of the Lord, to remain in the land of Judah. {Jer 43:1-4 RSV}

Isn't that strange? To this prophet's face, after forty years or more of his ministry of highest integrity, they dared to say, "You are telling a lie. God didn't send you." They justified it by blaming someone else. "Baruch did it." Have you ever done that? Have you ever blamed someone else for your own problem, put the blame on somebody else who is involved, yes, but who really is not the cause? The flesh loves to transfer blame. And blaming another is almost always the mark of the flesh in action, deceiving you, leading you on into worse things than you ever have known before.

So the people come down to Egypt despite the word of God. This people, who had been delivered from Egypt 900 years before the power of God, is now back in Egypt again, back in the land of bondage, the land of peril.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah down in Egypt, at Tahpanhes. The word of God is never bound. The people of God may be bound, but the word of God is never bound. The word comes to Jeremiah and tells him again to do one of those strange things which are graphic illustrations of truth. He is to take large stones and hide them in the mortar of the pavement at the entrance to Pharaoh's house in Tahpanhes, as a testimony to the fact that Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon would come down to Egypt and spread his royal canopy above these stones. The thing they were trying to escape in Judah, they would find in Egypt. The king of Babylon would be there.

Some years ago Sir Flinders Petrie, the English Egyptologist, digging in the very location of the ancient city of Tahpanhes, found a pavement with large stones embedded in it. Jeremiah's stones are still there. This people had a testimony that God would confirm his word to them. They would find in Egypt what they were fleeing from.

In Chapter 44, we have the sequel. The people spread through the land of Egypt rather rapidly. Jeremiah calls them all together after they have been there a few months and announces to them that they are still doing the same things that brought judgment on them in Judah. The very things God objected to they are now resuming in Egypt. The women were the leaders in this, offering incense to the queen of heaven, i.e., the moon goddess, and giving themselves in idolatrous ways to the other Egyptian gods around them as well. That is what God judged Judah for, as Jeremiah reminds them. He tells them God will judge them here in this land too. Here is the reaction of the people, beginning at Verse 15:

Then all the men who knew that their wives had offered incense to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who dwelt in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah: "As for the word which you have spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not listen to you. But we will do everything that we have vowed, burn incense to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our princes, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; ..." {Jer 44:15-17a RSV}

This was an act of open defiance, of rebellious insolence, in which they said to Jeremiah, "We don't care what you say or what God says. We're going to do what we want." So it comes at last to open, insolent defiance. They justified it on these grounds:

"...for then [i.e., back in Judah] we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no evil. But since we left off burning incense to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine." {Jer 44:17b-18 RSV}

Isn't it strange how quickly the mind of the flesh can forget? Because they did have trouble in Judah -- plenty of it. And the extent to which they did have less trouble and more prosperity there was due not to their actions but to the grace of God, withholding judgment. But they could not see that. Because things were a little better in Judah they said, "Our trouble now is that we have offended the queen of heaven." So they go back to their idolatry and insolently refuse to obey.

Here is the judgment that falls on them. It marks the deepest level of decay of this nation. Verses 26-28:

"Therefore hear the words of the Lord, all you of Judah who dwell in the land of Egypt. Behold, I have sworn by my great name, says the Lord, that my name shall no more be invoked by the mouth of any man of Judah in all the land of Egypt, saying, 'As the Lord God lives.' Behold, I am watching over them for evil and not for good; all the men of Judah who are in the land of Egypt shall be consumed by the sword and by famine, until there is an end of them. And those who escape the sword shall return from the land of Egypt to the land of Judah, few in number, and all the remnant of Judah, who came to the land of Egypt to live, shall know whose word will stand, mine or theirs." {Jer 44:26-28 RSV}

God takes up the challenge they throw down to him, and he says that the judgment which falls upon them is that his name is removed from them. I do not know exactly what that meant in terms of practice in the life of this people, though I am sure it meant something very real. Very likely it was that they lost all sense of the existence of God. They lost the sense of God's presence in the world.

We live in a day when all around us people have lost the sense of the existence of God, and the result is terrible to watch. People have a sense of cosmic loneliness. They feel that man is abandoned, alone in the universe, and that all the tremendously complex problems of the world are his alone to solve. And many recognize that he has no ability to solve them. The result is a terrible, sinking despair that grips the heart. We see it all around us today. That is what happened in Egypt -- that sense of despair as these people lost the sense of their refuge in the name of God. It is an advantage to the man or woman who is disobeying God to realize that God is still there -- someone to go back to. But when you lose that sense, there is nothing left but loneliness and despair.

Chapter 45, which is the briefest of the book -- only four verses -- gives us the final picture of the flesh in action. This chapter comes from the time when Jeremiah sent Baruch down to the temple to read the words he had dictated, as we saw in our previous study. Chronologically it should follow Chapter 36. But Jeremiah has placed it right here because it gathers up the tendency of the heart which is behind all these manifestations of the flesh.

The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch the son of Neriah, when he wrote these words in a book at the dictation of Jeremiah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch:

You said, 'Woe is me! for the Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.'" {Jer 45:1-3 RSV}

Baruch had been sent down to the temple to read the words of the Lord, and this passage is telling us what he evidently felt in his own heart. He expected that his reading would have a tremendous impact upon the people, and that he himself would be exalted before them as the spokesman of God, and would be lifted up in their eyes. But it did not work that way. Instead, they rejected the words and they rejected Baruch. He went home feeling terrible about it, feeling that his whole ministry was useless. And he cried out to God this way: "Woe is me! for the Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest." So God sent Jeremiah to him with this message:

"Thus shall you say to him, Thus says the Lord: Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up -- that is, the whole land. And do you seek great things for yourself ? Seek them not; for, behold, I am bringing evil upon all flesh, says the Lord; But I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go." {Jer 45:4 RSV}

What is the root of all our troubles with the flesh? It is seeking great things for ourselves. That is behind the naivete, the secret vengeance, the treachery and murder, the unjustified fear, the pious deceit, the baseless hopes, the misdirected blame, the insolent rebellion -- all of these arise out of a heart which longs to have glory that belongs to God. That is the basic problem, is it not?

As we look at this we say to ourselves, "Who is sufficient for these things? How can we lick this terrible enemy within?" The only answer, of course, is the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. This is all that has ever been able to deal with the flesh in man's life: the cross which puts it to death; the resurrection which provides another life in its place. That is the glory of the gospel.

Near Watsonville, California there is a creek that has a strange name: Salsipuedes Creek. *Salsi puedes* is Spanish for "Get out of it if you can." The creek is lined with quicksand, and the story is that many years ago, in the early days of California, a Mexican laborer fell into the quicksand. A Spaniard, riding by on a horse, saw him and yelled out to him, "Salsi puedes! (Get out if you can!)" which was not very helpful. The creek has been so named ever since.

That is what the flesh is like. We struggle to correct these tendencies ourselves, but we cannot do it. Only God has the wisdom to do it. That is why Jeremiah's word in the tenth chapter comes to mind again. He said, "I know, O Lord, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps." And we are driven again to the wisdom of the Proverbs:

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and lean not unto your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he shall direct your paths. {cf, Prov 3:5-6 KJV}**

Nothing else will do it. Your own heart will deceive you. If you follow your own desires, your own likings, you will end up trapped. Only the wisdom of the Word, only an honest acknowledgment of what is going on in your life will suffice. Bring it to God and tell him the whole thing, and trust him to have put your flesh to death on his cross. And rely upon his resurrection to live by from there on, upon his power and his grace to lead you through.

It is his knowledge of this tendency of the flesh which has led our Lord to include in the Lord's Prayer the little phrase which I pray every day, and I hope you will too: "Lead us not into temptation."

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that you will indeed lead us away from temptation. Lead us from this evil thing within us from which we cannot escape, which deceives us, fools us, makes us think we are getting something when we will not, makes us think we are threatened by something

when we are not, and rises within us in murderous, treacherous rage. Lord, deliver us from evil by the power of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ our Lord. We pray in his name, Amen.

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