

## Chapter 42 Jeremiah 27-29

### The Future Hope

*“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’”* Jeremiah 29:11-13

In 597 BC, thousands of Israel’s leaders, soldiers, artisans and skilled craftsmen, were taken to Babylon in the second wave of exiles (52:28; 2 Kings 24:8-17). This first group included Jehoiachin, who succeeded Jehoiakim, and other notables, such as Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:2). They crossed the 550 miles of barren wasteland from Jerusalem to Babylon on foot and under armed guard. We would be naive if we thought this was not an ordeal of great suffering and privation.

Jeremiah’s famous words of hope and promise (29:11-14) introduce the highpoint of his entire prophecy. This section has been called the book of consolation (29:1-33:26) because it describes the end of suffering, the joy of salvation, and the promise of a new covenant. Jeremiah promised that the days of uprooting, upheaval and tearing down would end, and a new day would begin, a time to build and plant. According to Jeremiah, Israel’s future hope did not depend on the people who had been left behind in Judah, but upon those who had been carried into exile by Nebuchadnezzar. His prophecy countered the prevailing belief that Yahweh would never abandon Judah and in the end Jerusalem would be spared. King Zedekiah was convinced that God would perform wonders to save Judah (21:2) and the prophet Hananiah was not alone in prophesying that Babylon’s conquest would be short-lived (28:2-3).

To the political and religious leadership Jeremiah’s message sounded like cowardly capitulation, a case of outright treason. How could a true Israelite boldly declare to Zedekiah, “Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people, and you will live” (27:12)? No king wants to be told to give up and surrender, but that was exactly what Jeremiah insisted he must do. For close to 30 years Jeremiah had been led by the Lord to prophesy the conquest of Jerusalem. Right from the start, he envisioned foreign kings setting up their thrones at the gates of Jerusalem (1:15). He announced victory for the besieging army (4:16; 6:22-26) and exile for Jerusalem’s inhabitants, saying, “As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your own land, so now you will serve foreigners in a land not your own” (5:19). Jeremiah declared, “All Judah will be carried into exile, carried completely away” (13:19).

From a human perspective in a competitive dog-eat-dog world Jeremiah’s message was a betrayal of Judah’s pride, religious sentiment, and leadership. He advocated surrender to the invading forces on grounds that Judah needed to go through judgment and endure exile before it could experience God’s salvation. The Exodus, when Yahweh brought the Israelites up out of Egypt, was about to be superseded by the Exile (23:7-8). Both the Exodus and the Exile are turning points in Salvation History that serve as signposts on the way to the Cross. They are historical types illustrating our need for atonement; they are revelatory paradigms modeling

God's redemptive strategy of expiation and propitiation. Israel in bondage is the prototype of a world in sin. Even as I am a microcosm of a world in sin. We are lost in sin and we cannot save ourselves. We are rebels fighting against our liberation. Thus, Jeremiah's message was not as it appeared to Judah's leaders, a betrayal, but a hidden blessing that promised salvation. His message was all about judgment and redemption. Jeremiah explained that the exile was intended by God to move people to realize their need and turn to God for salvation. What was true then is still true today; in order for us to be raised up we have to be brought down. We have to come to terms with our captivity in order to experience freedom. The worst form of slavery is when slaves don't know they're enslaved. The exile helped the people see that they were bent on idolatry, addicted to adultery, and stuck in patterns of disobedience. They had to be taken out of their comfort zone in order to see how far out of it they were. Their only hope for deliverance rested in turning to God.

As we have seen, the dissonance between popular expectations and Jeremiah's prophetic ministry provoked serious opposition and endangered his life. The tensions Jeremiah encountered throughout his ministry remind us of the tensions Jesus encountered when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Messianic fervor was running high and the crowd's loud cheers and hosannas reflected popular expectations. Jesus chose a powerful messianic symbol when he rode into Jerusalem on a colt. The people were looking for a political savior who would rally the nation and throw off the yoke of Roman oppression. They wanted someone who would fight for them, lead them out of bondage, and give them back their pride. In the excitement of a large crowd singing praises, waving palm branches, and laying down their cloaks in the dust, Jesus looked like a good candidate to lead a popular uprising against Rome. What no one in the crowd expected, including his disciples, was that Jesus had "arranged that his coronation take place on a cross" (Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 118). In Jeremiah's day, salvation was on the other side of the exile; in Jesus' day it was on the other side of the Cross. In the mind of God, the two events are linked. Going through the exile proved to be a type or a pattern for living under the Cross, reminding us that "the gospel of Jesus Christ is more political than anyone imagines, but in a way that no one guesses" (Peterson, *RT*, 117).

### **Good News for Captives**

"God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life," is certainly true, but its interpretation is critical. Many suffer delusional ideas when it comes to God's plan for their lives. Their mind seems bent on happiness and security issues. They immediately think of God's direction for their individual lives in terms of education, career, marriage and family. They *want* to interpret God's promise as a supernatural guarantee that offers them personal peace, physical security, economic success and inner significance. And when that kind of spiritualized success does not materialize they are disappointed with God. It is often unclear whether or not there is a distinction between a worldly strategy for self-fulfillment and Jesus' strategy for self-fulfillment. The "wonderful plan" seems to have little to do with taking up a cross and following Jesus and more to do with a false gospel of health and wealth. They forget that Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Mt 16:24-25).

Jeremiah sent an open letter to the first wave of exiles in 594 BC to challenge them to accept the hard work ahead and to warn them against delusional alternatives. His letter is another example of God's redemptive reversal which we have come to expect in salvation history. It is consistent with the principle that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Instead of siding with those who stayed behind in Judah, God sided with the exiles. The future belonged to a remnant that God would call out of captivity. In the middle of what must have been a very difficult time for the exiles, Jeremiah delivered God's message of hope:

“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile’” (29:11-14).

Jeremiah's Spirit-inspired letter not only helped the exiles embrace God's plan, but it helps us who follow the Lord Jesus Christ to understand and obey God's plan for our lives. Jeremiah instructed the exiles in seven critical truths about the plan of God. All seven apply to the people of God today.

*First, God's plan is revealed in his word.* Jeremiah's letter to the exiles and his postscript to Shemaiah is punctuated eighteen times with references to the word of the Lord. Every thought is rooted in God's word and accredited with the sanction, thus *declares the Lord*. Jeremiah is a great example of what the apostle Paul affirmed when he said, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor 10:4-5). To base the will of God on human speculation, opinions and feelings, is to fall victim to the spirit of the times and the mood of the moment. But to establish God's will on the solid ground of God's revelation is to live on a firm foundation that weathers the storms of life and the volatility of feelings. The word of the Lord defines the long obedience in the same direction, apart from which we are constantly wandering down dead ends and dark alleys.

What Paul said of himself could be said of Jeremiah, “I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God” (1 Cor 2:1). Jeremiah did not come to negotiate but to announce. His primary responsibility was to proclaim rather than persuade, to deliver rather than debate. He repeatedly reiterated that the message he gave was not his own by way of invention or speculation but his by order of the Lord Almighty. What if we were as compelled to receive and obey the word of the Lord, as Jeremiah was to give it? It was like fire in his bones (20:9).

*Second, God's plan integrates the reality of pain and suffering into the gift of salvation.* In the introduction to this section, we are told that Jeremiah's letter was sent to the leaders and the people whom “Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon,” but in the

letter itself, Jeremiah credits the Lord God with carrying the people into exile (29:1, 4). Who was responsible for the people's suffering in captivity, Nebuchadnezzar or the Lord Almighty? On the one hand, Nebuchadnezzar was responsible for this cruel and evil captivity, but on the other hand, Jeremiah saw the king of Babylon as God's instrument of judgment to punish Judah for their spiritual apostasy, disobedience and rebellion. It should also be said that Jeremiah was not afraid to declare publicly that Babylon would be judged harshly for their oppression of Israel (50:1f).

To credit the Lord God with responsibility for the captivity put a distinct but necessary twist to the meaning of suffering. And even as cruel and inhumane as the suffering was, it was the tragic consequence Jeremiah had prophesied because of Judah's constant rejection of the word of the Lord and rebellion against God's ways. Judah had brought this captivity upon herself. No understanding of the will of God that failed to integrate this suffering could be called a wonderful plan. Jeremiah understood this suffering as necessary in God's redemptive plan to bring people back to a saving dependence upon the Lord God. Undoubtedly many of the exiles were disappointed with God. It is safe to assume that there was talk about being abandoned by God and deserted by him in their hour of greatest need. But they had no excuse. They had themselves to blame, rather than God to resent, for the captivity.

God takes credit for the consequences of evil actions, because judgment itself is a means of grace driving us back to God. There are two kinds of suffering, the suffering we experience as a direct result of our sin and the suffering we endure because we live in a sinful and evil world, but there is only one purpose for suffering and that is to move us to God. All suffering has a redemptive purpose, to lead both sinner and victim, back to God in total dependence upon his grace and mercy. When we follow the sinful inclinations of our heart, God gives us up to the consequences of our motives and actions, so that we might experience the tragedy of that "freedom" and turn to God. As long as we refuse to acknowledge our *captivity* we will never be released from the bondage of sin and death. Until we understand that the wages of sin is death we will never turn to God for the gift of eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6:23).

*Third, God's plan leads us to obey his will today in the normal course of ordinary life.* Knowing the will of God is not a secret that needs to be discovered, but a command that needs to be obeyed. It is not about figuring out the future; it is about faithfulness in the present. Knowing the will of God is not so much about choosing a college, a career, or a spouse, but choosing the path of obedience and devotion that the living God has clearly laid out in his word. Life is not a maze of right turns and wrong turns, but a marathon of trust and dependence.

Jeremiah's letter to the exiles is a great illustration of this principle. He told them to live into the future by obeying God today. The will of God was simple and plain: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease" (29:5). In other words, ordinary life was meant to be the proving ground of faithfulness. They were meant to get to work, build relationships and leave the future in God's hands. Trust in Yahweh was to be worked out in community through work,

marriage, and parenting. This recalls the apostle Paul's exhortation to the church, when he wrote, "We hear that some among you are idle. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ, to settle down and earn the bread they eat. And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is right" (2 Thess 3:11-13). The exile afforded a new opportunity for the chosen people of God to discover all over again what it meant to live faithfully and obediently. The stranglehold of false spirituality, self-indulgent materialism and sexual promiscuity, that had squeezed the life out of Jerusalem, had been broken in Babylon of all places. They were given a fresh opportunity to live for God in a foreign land. God's plan for them, as it is for us, was to live in the world but not of the world. If we seek first Christ's kingdom and his righteousness, God will take care of the future (Mt 6:33).

*Fourth, God's plan challenges us to pray and work for the good of others.* The prophet who was told by the Lord at various times *not* to pray for his own people wrote to the exiles on behalf of the Lord saying, "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (29:7). This is remarkable counsel because it was given to a people who were far more inclined to hate their captors than pray for them. Normally, oppressed people define their identity in opposition to the culture that exploits them, but in this case, Jeremiah exhorted them to do what Jesus told his disciples to do, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44). They were to love their neighbors as themselves (Mt 22:39). Jeremiah's counsel, given about 600 years before Christ, gave the people of God a hint of the Gospel ethic to come. The apostle Peter wrote, "Slaves submit yourselves to your master with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a person bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God" (1 Pet 2:18-19). Jeremiah's understanding of the plan of God echoes the divine principle that says, "Identify yourself with my interest in other people, don't identify me with your interest in other people."

*Fifth, God's plan resists deception, especially the strong tendency to deceive ourselves.* In his letter, Jeremiah issued an emphatic warning, "'Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,' declares the Lord." (29:8-9). By now we are used to this often repeated warning from Jeremiah. He knew that the redemptive plan of God would come under attack by leaders who thought they were doing God and the people a favor. In the name of popular spirituality, religious pluralism, civil religion and national pride, self-designated prophets in Jerusalem and Babylon predicted a short exile and a quick return to the homeland. They insisted on an up-beat, pragmatic message that they thought would encourage the people, but Jeremiah insisted on seeing the captivity for what it was and enduring it by God's grace. The false prophets were preaching independence from Babylon and Jeremiah was preaching dependence upon God. They refused to come to terms with Judah's sin while Jeremiah insisted that the exile was really God's grace in disguise. Ironically, Jeremiah warned them not to listen to the dreams they encouraged the prophets to have. The people may have deserved the prophets they got but they were not the prophets they needed. They needed teachers who would "preach the Word," teachers who would "be prepared in season and out of season," to "correct, rebuke and encourage—with great

patience and careful instruction.” To express Jeremiah’s thought in St. Paul’s words, Jeremiah warned them against gathering around them “a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want[ed] to hear” (2 Tim 4:2-3). Jeremiah knew that when we take ourselves and our culture as the basic and authoritative text for making decisions and living life we are bound to fail (Peterson). The temptation to exegete our hopes and dreams, as a primary sacred text with a little biblical terminology and spiritualized self-help thrown in, is always a recipe for failure.

*Sixth, God’s plan is fulfilled in an abiding, intimate relationship with God.* The purpose of God’s will is not something that lends itself to being purpose-driven or achievement oriented. It is not about stages of moral development or rounding the bases of spiritual achievement. There is no spiritual score card in God’s plan for your life. Knowing God’s plan for your life is all about knowing God. Jeremiah described how we would know that we are in God’s will in relational terms: “‘Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found of you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and will bring you back from captivity’” (29:12-13). The sign of knowing God’s plan is not material wealth or career success or the perfect family, but an authentic, whole-hearted communion with God. Jesus used the imagery of the vine and the branches to describe what it meant to know God’s will: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). The apostle Paul described knowing God’s plan this way, “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things...I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:8-11). *Seventh, God’s plan provokes serious opposition from those who claim to follow God.* Shemaiah was one of the false prophets in Babylon who took it upon himself to start a letter campaign against Jeremiah. He sent letters to the priests in Jerusalem reprimanding them for their failure to fulfill their God-given responsibility to “put any madman who acts like a prophet into the stocks and leg-irons” (29:26). Specifically, he was after Jeremiah. “So why haven’t you done anything about muzzling Jeremiah of Anathoth, who’s going around posing as a prophet? He’s gone so far as to write to us in Babylon, ‘It’s going to be a long exile, so build houses and make yourselves at home. Plant gardens and prepare Babylonian recipes’” (29:27-28, The Message).

What is surprising is that after decades of unflinching spiritual integrity, courageous ministry, and fulfilled prophesy, Jeremiah could still be accused of being a madman. But then hasn’t this always been the case for those who live their lives true to God’s great Salvation History story? This is the story within the story for those who believe in the plan of God. The list is long of those who were thought to be either mad or posers. Among the many who belong alongside Jeremiah on that list, put down Noah, Joseph, Job and Moses. The supreme example was Jesus who was considered crazy by his family and called a son of the Devil by the religious leaders. Paul was beaten within an inch of his life for alleged blasphemy and Stephen was stoned to death. God’s plan has never gone over well with those who refuse to listen to the word of the Lord and insist on their own visions and dreams of how religion should succeed. God’s plan to give us hope and a future invariably runs counter to popular spirituality, God-and-country religion, and self-centered visions.

