

Judgment and Promise:

God Speaks through the Prophet Jeremiah, #9

“Advice to Those in Exile”

Jer. 29

--CEFC 3/21/21

Topics: Christian Living; Politics; Hope; Realism

They say there are only two kinds of people in the world:

There are those who say there are only two kinds of people in the world;
and there are those who don't.

And among those who say there are only two kinds of people in the world,

there are the optimists--

those who say that every day in every way

things are getting better and better.

and then there are the pessimists--

those who are certain that yesterday will be better than tomorrow.

Of course, people generally prefer optimists--

but that's not always the case.

As many of you know, I grew up in Tampa—

home of the 2021 Superbowl Champion Buccaneers of the NFL.

But as some of you may know, the Buccaneers have not always been so successful.

In fact, they lost all of their first 26 games,

and for their first 25 years,

they had the worst franchise win/loss record
of any team in any professional sport.

I remember being in Tampa in one of those earlier years
when they fired their head coach, Sam Wyche.

It was no surprise--

Football coaches are hired to win, and Sam Wyche didn't.

He perpetuated the losing tradition of the Bucs,
losing more than 40 games in his four years there.

And you would think that if anywhere there was a need for an optimist
it was in Tampa.

But one of the big criticisms I heard about Sam Wyche at the time,

was that he was too optimistic--

after every loss

he kept saying good things about how well his team played
and how much they were improving.

It seems the fans got tired of it.

They wanted him to just come out and say that the team stunk
and needed a lot of work to get better.

An optimism out of touch with reality can get you in trouble.

But rarely do people enjoy a **pessimist**.

He's always seeing the worst in every situation--

pouring cold water on everybody's party,

almost reveling in other people's misfortune.

And it was the role of the pessimist that poor Jeremiah was called to play
in his prophetic ministry to the people of Judah.

While all the other prophets were predicting nothing but “Peace, Peace,”
Jeremiah spoke of the coming wrath of God in judgment against his people.

The unrepentant hearts of the people made judgment inevitable--

“The Babylonians are coming!

The Babylonians are coming!” he cried.

“and when they come, things are going to be bad—really bad,

and for a long, long time.”

But nobody listened.

That was not the message they wanted to hear.

Even after the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar

had made an initial attack on the city

and had taken away King Jehoiachin and a few thousand of the leading citizens,

the people of Judah still didn't listen.

Not to Jeremiah, at least.

They much preferred the message of the court prophets--

“O no, this is just a temporary set back--

The king and the rest of the exiles will be home in no time.

Two years, max.”

We can understand their preference for the optimism of that message—

This time last year,

didn't we all want to believe that this pandemic would be over by Easter?

But poor Jeremiah, the Puddleglum of prophets,
kept singing the same old song--
“Repent, for the Lord is angry--
he is angry at your adultery and your idolatry,
he is angry at your abuse of the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow,
he is angry at your disregard for his holiness—
and he will come in anger to destroy this city
and to take you away to a foreign land.”

This is the situation that surrounds our passage this morning from Jeremiah 29,
but in this chapter, we will see Jeremiah himself
shift the emphasis of his message from one of judgment
to one of hope.

Refusing to be either the naive optimist
or the despairing pessimist--
instead Jeremiah shows us the way of the godly realist
offering an ultimate hope.

And it is this perspective
that we must have as we engage in our present circumstances
in the light of our future destiny.

Turn with me now as we look more closely
at this letter of advice to those in Exile in Jer. 29.

29:1--“This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem
to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets

and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile
from Jerusalem to Babylon.”

As we mentioned before,

King Nebuchnezzar of Babylon had besieged Jerusalem in 597 B.C.
and had taken the king and a few thousand others
in exile back with him to his country.

Just imagine how those people must have felt—

Their city had been ransacked, the holy temple had been plundered,
they had lost their homes, their possessions,
and they had been carted off as exiles to some distant land
with its foreign culture.

And what a strange thing to happen—

to go from Jerusalem to Babylon—

a phrase that is found three times in this chapter.

Wasn't that going in the wrong direction—

wasn't it a reversal of the divine plan?

The Lord had brought Abraham out of the land of Babylon

into the promised land around Jerusalem.

Now that sacred history seemed to be going backward.

They seem to be back as square one.¹

How could this be?

Where was the Lord Yahweh their God in all of this?

¹ C. Wright, 290-291.

Did he care?

Was he really on their side at all?

Was he powerless to prevent this horrible catastrophe?

Were the gods of Babylon victorious over the Lord?

What had happened to all his promises to be with his people?

You can imagine the spiritual disillusionment that they experienced.

We get a taste of the bitterness that felt

when we read Psalm 137 which was probably written

after the final destruction of the city a few years later—

Psa. 137:1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept

when we remembered Zion.

There on the poplars

we hung our harps,

for there our captors asked us for songs,

our tormentors demanded songs of joy;

they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How can we sing the songs of the LORD

while in a foreign land?

8 Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,

happy is the one who repays you

according to what you have done to us.

Happy is the one who seizes your infants

and dashes them against the rocks.

The false prophets who had remained in Judah were utterly astonished
that the Lord would ever allow such a thing,
and they were sure that it would be short-lived.

They prophesied that the exile would soon be over.

In 594 B.C. there appears to have been considerable political unrest in Babylon,
which may have encouraged these expectations of a quick return of these deportees.

And this may have been the immediate occasion of this letter Jeremiah sent to them,
proclaiming the Lord's assessment of their situation.

v. 4--"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says

to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

"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."

This is Jeremiah's first message to these people who had been taken into Exile--

Accept the place God has put you.

Yes, it is true--

As v. 1 states, these are the "people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile
from Jerusalem to Babylon."

But the true prophet sees behind the scenes—

and though Nebuchadnezzar was the human instrument,
the Lord Almighty was still in control.

Four times-- in v. 4, in v. 7, in v. 14, and again in v. 20 the Lord refers to
“those /carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:”

Is this really God’s work?

All this suffering and pain?

all the horrors of war—all the destruction and death
and the total disruption of life?

Surely God could never be implicated in such evil.

But the Bible is not shy about attributing to God’s sovereignty

what seems so horrifying to us.

I am reminded of a story one pastor tells

of one of the most formative moments of his young pastoral career.

As a seminary student, he was shadowing a hospital chaplain

when they were called to a room where a woman’s son

had been pronounced dead after a tragic car accident.

The women lamented over and over again,

“Why did God do this to me?”

Why did God do this to me?”

The chaplain, trying to be helpful, inserted,

“Ma’am, God didn’t have anything to do with your son’s death.”

To this statement, the wailing yet wise woman

looked at the chaplain straight in the eyes
and said, "Don't you take away the only hope that I have."

That grieving mother knew that if God is not fully sovereign in her suffering,
then she could not trust that he is fully in control of her healing and recovery.
He is no longer a God who can save.

If God's hands are tied when the Worst enters your life,
then maybe his powers are also limited in helping you.

Jeremiah wants the exiles to know
that it was the Lord who carried them there.
Only then could they know that the Lord could carry them back.

Wasn't this the same with Job—
When the Lord finally appears to Job in his great suffering,
he doesn't blame Satan for what had happened to Job.
No, the Lord reveals his majesty and sovereign power over all of creation—
far beyond anything Job could ever understand or even imagine.
That is what finally comforts Job.

So I ask you, How big is your God?/

No, Jeremiah declares,
this was God's doing--
and you won't be going anywhere anytime soon--
in fact, your exile will last a full seventy years.

Seventy years is a whole lifetime;

is encompasses three generations.

Could you imagine being sentenced to jail for seventy years?

This means that no one who would read Jeremiah's letter

could expect to return to Jerusalem alive.

Jeremiah says,

Don't listen to those false prophets who gloss over the seriousness of your sin,

and who suppose that the Lord doesn't care

that you have turned your backs on him.

This period of Exile is the just consequence of your waywardness.

And the first step in your reconciliation with God

is to accept this discipline as his work.

You must accept the place God has put you.

But don't think that just because you are put in this place of Exile

that you are to be passive,

doing nothing but waiting during this period.

You are to do more than just grudgingly acquiesce to what God has done.

No--

The Lord's advice through Jeremiah is that these people

are to get on with life--even in Babylon.

Build houses,

settle down,
plant gardens and eat what they produce--
get married and give your children in marriage,
so that they too may have sons and daughters
and increase in numbers there.

In other words, no longer think of yourselves as refugees, but as residents.²

As we'll see, this was not to be their permanent home,
but it was to be their present one—
and in this place they were to get on with life.

In fact, it was here that they would experience a renewal of their nation.

And what the Lord says next in v. 7 was even more startling—

**“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.”**

This was extraordinary---

it was unheard of--

that these Israelites should pray for this enemy nation--
this nation that had attacked their land
and plundered its people.

This nation that had seized their infants and dashed them against the rocks.

Pray for these people? Really?

This is perhaps the closest you get in the Old Testament
to those shocking words of Jesus,

² Ibid.

when he says, “I tell you, love your enemies
and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt. 5:44).

“seek the peace and prosperity—the “welfare,” the *Mwâølvv*--
of the city to which I have carried you into exile”

Be engaged in the common life of the city,
work for the common good of this place.
Be good citizens in this foreign land—
be a blessing to those around you.
That’s your mission while you are in Babylon.

This is Jeremiah’s first piece of advice to those taken into exile—

Accept the place God has put you--
put away your naive optimism
that would lead you to believe that it would only be a momentary inconvenience.

Jeremiah urges realism--
Settle in and get on with life.
You’re stuck here for the long haul--
so make the best of it.
Seek the peace and prosperity of the place God has put you.

But in the second section of this letter the prophet Jeremiah,

who had for so long sounded that persistent message of judgment,
offers a wonderful word of consolation and of hope—

The same God who can uproot and tear down,
can also build and plant.

v 10--“This is what the LORD says:

“When seventy years are completed for Babylon,
I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.
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.

To those who were naively optimistic, Jeremiah is the realist;

but to those who were tempted to despair,

Jeremiah offers words of hope--

The Lord is in this--

he knows what he’s doing--

and his purpose in all of this is for your good--

to give you hope and a future.

Now it is Jeremiah who is preaching a message of salvation,

a message of “**Peace, peace.**”

But the difference is that his message of peace

comes on the other side of the Exile.

It is a peace that emerges through God’s judgment.

It is a peace that first respects God’s demand for righteousness and holiness.

After proclaiming God's wrath,

he now is able to proclaim God's saving mercy.

Isn't how the message of the gospel works--

There are lots of people who simply want to proclaim, "Peace, peace."

"God loves everybody;

God accepts everybody;

Of course, everybody's going to heaven--

it doesn't matter what road they take--

they all end up in the same place."

But a proper understanding of the gospel

has a kind of bad news/good news dimension to it.

It's like the farmer who had experienced several bad years

who went to see the manager of the bank.

"I've got some good news and some bad news for you.

What do you want to hear first."

"Why don't you tell me the bad news first and get it over with?" the banker replied.

"OK--with the bad drought and inflation and all,

I won't be able to pay anything on my mortgage this year--

either on the principle or the interest.

"Well, that's pretty bad."

"It gets worse.

I also won't be able to pay anything on the loan for all that machinery I bought--

ether on the principle or the interest.”

“Wow, that’s really bad.”

“It’s worse than that.

You remember I also borrowed to buy seeds and fertilizer and other supplies.

“Well, I can’t pay on that either--principle or interest.”

“Now that’s terrible--

please tell me, what’s the good news?”

“The good news,” replied the farmer,

“is that I intend to keep on doing business with you.”

The bad news of the gospel is that we’re all bankrupt before God--

and only that fact makes the good news good--

that our God wants to do business with us anyway--

by paying our debt himself.

Christ’s death on the cross is a demonstration of God’s love

only when we understand the terrible moral failure

that made that death necessary.

This is the message of Jeremiah.

Only after the judgment of the exile is accepted

can the grace and mercy of God be received for what it is.

It is a grace that maintains God’s holiness;

it is a mercy that respects his justice.

God’s plan for his people is to overcome their sin by his grace--

and the demonstration of that grace is yet to come for those in Exile—
“When seventy years are completed for Babylon,
I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.”

“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.”

“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.”

What a wonderful passage that is.

Notice the certainty of it—
“I know the plans I have for you,”
“I know” the Lord says—
And what the Lord knows is what will most certainly come to pass.
God promises good to his people—
a hope and a future.
And God keeps his promises.

I suspect this verse is among the most beloved of the Bible—
and rightly so.
People frame it and hang it on their wall
to remind them of God’s goodness and grace.

It ranks right up there with Rom. 8:28—

“we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,
who have been called according to his purpose.”

Jer. 29:11--“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.”

I commend this verse to you—

memorize this verse,

meditate on this verse—put it in your heart.

These are precious words from God.

But just make sure you remember the context in which these words are given.

This is no blanket promise of health and wealth—

a happy life with no troubles or trials.

These words were spoken to a broken people,

to exiles in a foreign land—

to people who had experienced something like a death.

These words are words of hope for those in hardship.

They tell us that no trial is too hard for the Lord to overcome in our lives.

He can bring us through anything that life throws at us.

His purposes for us are good—

even when we are walking in darkness.

For what is God’s purpose in allowing us to go through hardship?

What is the proper response to this promise?

It is found in v. 12—

“Then you will call on 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.”

This is God’s plan for you—

this is his plan to prosper you—

it is to take you through pain so that you will call upon his name.

“You will call on me,

you will seek me and you will find me,” he says—

for his grace will see that it will be so.

These exiles are the ones the Lords calls the good figs, remember—

the ones on whom he would regard for good in his grace.

He will bring them back from captivity to be his people and he will be their God.

He will turn their hearts back to him,

and they will seek him and he will be found.

That’s what he wants in each of our lives.

Accept the place God has put you;

Hope for the place God will take you.

These are the two pieces of advice that Jeremiah gave to those in Exile in Babylon,

and I think they are the two pieces of advice that he would give to us, too.

For there is a sense in which Jeremiah's letter
could be addressed to us as Christian believers--
for the New Testament pictures us as exiles--
away from our true home.

Peter speaks of believers as "**aliens and strangers in the world**" (1 Pet. 2:11);
Paul says that "**our citizenship is in heaven**" (Phil. 3:20).

We are "**not of this world**," Jesus says.

We are exiles in a foreign land--
and Jeremiah would say to us--

Accept the place that God has put you.

First, it's important that we recognize the Lord's sovereign hand
in the circumstances of our lives—
In some sense, we are where we are because God has put us there,
and we must accept that place, whatever it may be.
It may not be where you want to be, but it's where you are,
and the Lord has a purpose for you wherever that may be.
Can you accept that?

Just think of the difference it makes

when you think of yourself as someone in exile--

You realize that life here won't necessarily be easy.

The Jewish exiles in Babylon faced a very challenging existence--
their resources were limited,
their prospects were meager,

but the Lord told them to settle in and do the best they could.

And for the Christian

to realize that this world is not our home--

means that we shouldn't expect to be treated fairly;

we shouldn't be surprised when we suffer misfortune.

This is a fallen world--

a world that is suffering the consequences of human sin--

it is under the judgment of God.

and we all share in those consequences--

our kids get sick, too.

our parents grow old and frail;

our bodies decay just like everybody else.

The world can be hostile to those who seek to live godly lives—

just look what happened to Jesus.

We are in exile--

so don't be naively optimistic about your prospects in the short term.

No one said it would be easy.

We're in exile--every one of us--

none of us has yet to arrive in the promised land--

what should we expect while living in Babylon?

This is important as we encounter suffering;

And this is important as we think of politics--

we shouldn't expect to create the kingdom of God on earth--

we are in Exile--this is Babylon.

Every political scheme,

in fact, every human institution,

is corrupted by sin and will fall short and will ultimately fail.

All we can hope for here is some movement toward the good.

Don't expect to find the perfect political program—

it doesn't exist—not in this world.

But neither should we sit back passively and let life pass us by--

As Paul puts it,

“as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people,

especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” -- Gal. 6:10

We should seek the welfare of the city in which God has placed us.

We will never perfect that city--

we will always fall short of God's ultimate design,

but we should seek to do what we can while we're here

to make things better in this city.

We are to seek the peace and prosperity of that city—

We are to look out, not just our own interests,

but the common interests—the common good.

I am challenged by that when I wonder how we as Christians,

and how we as a church,

contribute to the welfare of our local community—

would they miss us if we are gone?

Are we instruments of peace in our neighborhood—

seeking to bring people together rather than tear them apart.

Do we care for those in need around us?

We should seek the welfare of the city in which God has placed us,

for our prosperity depends on its prosperity--

so we must pray for it, Jeremiah says.

Is that something you do--pray for your nation, your community?

1Tim. 2:1,2--"I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers,

intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone--

for kings and all those in authority,

that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."

Being exiles doesn't mean we live apart,

with no contact with those around us.

Jeremiah challenges us, as he did the exiles in Babylon,

to live in the world without being of it—

being salt and light to the glory of God.

Don't be naively optimistic--

we must accept where God has put us--as aliens and strangers in this world--

as exiles--
and we shouldn't expect it to be over by Easter.

But there is no reason for despair--

for Israel, or for us--

Jer. 29:10 This is what the LORD says:

**"When seventy years are completed for Babylon,
I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place."**

Doesn't that sound like those words of Jesus--

John 14:2,3--"In my Father's house are many rooms; . . .

I am going there to prepare a place for you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you,

I will come back and take you to be with me

that you also may be where I am."

Our time in exile,

our existence in this world,

is but the preface to something far better--

we have a great hope--

a hope that can sustain us to the end--

for it is a hope based on the gracious promise of God.

The Lord Jesus promises to bring us to be with him on that great day

—that great return from exile—

when he brings us into his eternal kingdom.

Jer. 29:11 "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."

This isn't a naive optimism;

it is a realistic hope--

a hope that endures hardship

knowing that on the other side is a bright future,

for God is at work through it all.

Do you know that kind of hope?

The hope that is able to face even death itself

and see beyond it a glorious future in the purposes of God?

That's what the resurrection of Jesus sets before our eyes—that hope and future—

for there we see the initial fulfillment of this good plan of God for his people.

Jeremiah is not rosy-eyed optimist--

oblivious to the harsh realities of life.

Nor is he a dreary pessimist--

discouraged and depressed with no hope for the future.

No, Jeremiah is a godly realist, with a vibrant faith in the gracious plan of God--

working itself out in good times and in bad--

always headed for a glorious end.

Do you see the balance here?

Being a Christian isn't just about going to heaven when you die,

as if what you do in this life has no value.

No, we are to seek the peace and prosperity of the city—

we are to do good in the place God has put us.

What we do here and now is important and valuable in the sight of God

But we are still exiles—and this present world is not our permanent home,

and we can persevere in doing good, even in this fallen, sinful world,

because of the hope that is set before us—

the hope of a new world—

where all that is wrong will be set right,

and where the Lord will reign in righteousness.

Can you accept where God has put you?

Can you work for the welfare of the city—in the here and now.

But do you also have a hope that goes beyond the here and now?

What are your prospects as you look to the future?

Who knows what may happen?

You may experience the greatest year of your life--

with new opportunities,

new relationships,

new accomplishments.

Or maybe it will be the toughest you've ever experienced--

We don't know.

But we do know this--

that God has a plan for each of us --
That's his promise--
"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."

Let's take Jeremiah's advice of his letter to the exiles to heart--
it's addressed to us also. ///

Prayer--

Closing Hymn: *I Am Bound*

Benediction:

Eph. 3:20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more
than all we ask or imagine,
according to his power that is at work within us,
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations,
for ever and ever! Amen.

Judgment and Promise:

God Speaks through the Prophet Jeremiah, #9

March 21, 2021

“Advice to Those in Exile”

Jer. 29:1-14

The false prophets in Israel were naively optimistic regarding those in exile in Babylon. Jeremiah is much more pessimistic, but in his letter to those exiles he offers a realistic hope on the other side of hardship. And his advice to the exiles applies to us as well.

I. Accept the place God has put you.

*“Build houses and settle down;
plant gardens and eat what they produce. . . .” (v. 5)*

Work for its welfare.

*“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.” (v. 7)*

II. Hope for the place God will take you.

*“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.” (v. 11)*

Let that hope sustain you.

Sermon Response:

“Advice to Those in Exile”

Jer. 29

- Was Nebuchadnezzar the one who took the Israelites into Babylon or was it God? Why is it important to affirm God’s sovereignty over all things—even very bad things?
- Can you accept where God has put you right now?
- What makes Christians godly realists rather than naïve optimists or despairing pessimists? How do you keep that proper balance in your life?
- If the gospel saves us for the world to come why should we worry about what we do in this world?
- How can you work for the peace and prosperity of the city in which God has placed you?
- Reflect on the promise of Jer. 29:11. How should you apply it to your life?
- What is God’s purpose in taking his people through the horror of the exile? What is God’s purpose in taking you through hard times?
- How can the hope of the gospel sustain you to persevere in doing good?
- take time to pray in the light of the truth of this passage.

