

The Books of Jeremiah and Lamentations

Lesson 14: A Letter to the Exiles -- Jeremiah 29:1-32

The captives are gone. In 597 BC the Babylonians had marched off the cream of Jerusalem, King Jehoiachin, the officials, the craftsmen, the smiths, hundreds of miles east to the canals of Babylon. And there they sat, a homesick people in a pagan empire, certain of only one thing: this nightmare cannot last long. False prophets buzzed in their ears that the exile would be brief, that Babylon would fall any day, that they should keep their bags packed and their hearts unsettled. Into that fevered hope Jeremiah does a strange thing. He writes them a letter. Not a battle plan, not a countdown, but a letter telling them, in effect, to settle down.

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters... multiply there, and do not decrease” (29:5-6). It must have sounded almost like betrayal. Build houses? In Babylon? Plant gardens in the soil of our captors? But then comes the line that turns the whole letter on its head: “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (29:7). Pray for Babylon. Bless the city that broke your heart. God’s people are to be a blessing even in the place of their grief.

And then God lifts the curtain on His timing. “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place” (29:10). Seventy years. Most of them would die in exile. This was not the quick fix the false prophets sold. But it was the truth, and the truth carried a promise wrapped inside one of the best-loved verses in all of Scripture: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (29:11).

We tend to cross-stitch that verse onto pillows and graduation cards as a private promise of personal success. But it was first spoken to a battered community in chains, who were told to wait seventy years for it. The future and the hope God promised were real, and they reached far beyond a return ticket to Judah. They pointed forward to a restoration deeper than geography, the spiritual homecoming God would accomplish in His Son for all who are His. As we read this letter, we are reading mail addressed to every believer who has ever felt like an exile in a world that is not home, and who needs to hear, from the God who keeps His word, that He has plans, and a future, and a hope.

Group Discussion: God told the exiles to build houses, plant gardens, and seek the welfare of the very city that had carried them away captive (29:5-7). Why is it so hard to invest in and bless a place where we feel we do not belong, and what does it look like for Christians to seek the welfare of the communities and culture where God has placed us as sojourners?

Personal Reflection: Jeremiah 29:11 was first spoken to a people facing seventy years of exile, not as a promise of quick personal success. How does hearing this verse in its true setting, as

God's faithful word to a waiting, suffering people, change the way you lean on it in your own seasons of waiting and disappointment?

Read Jeremiah 29:1–32

Study Questions

1. Read 29:4–7. God tells the exiles to build houses, plant gardens, marry, and “seek the welfare of the city” of Babylon, praying for it (29:7). What does this command reveal about how God's people are to live faithfully even in the midst of a pagan culture that is not their home?
2. God called His people to bless and pray for Babylon, the city of their captivity, rather than to withdraw in bitterness (29:7). Where are you tempted to withdraw from, resent, or write off the place or people God has set you among, and what would it look like to seek their welfare instead?
3. Read 29:8–9. God warns the exiles not to listen to the prophets and diviners among them who “prophesy a lie to you in my name” (29:9). Why is false hope, the comforting message that the hard road will be shorter and easier than God says, so dangerous to God's people?
4. The exiles were surrounded by voices promising a quicker, easier deliverance than God had actually promised (29:8–9). What “false prophets,” voices, messages, or hopes, are you tempted to believe because they tell you what you want to hear rather than what is true?

5. Read 29:10–11. God promises, “When seventy years are completed... I will visit you” and “I know the plans I have for you... plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (29:10–11). What does this promise reveal about God’s sovereignty over history, His faithfulness to His word, and the true nature of the “future and hope” He gives?
6. Many treat 29:11 as a guarantee of personal comfort and success, yet it was God’s word to exiles who would wait a lifetime. How does anchoring your hope in God’s larger, often slower, purposes guard you against both despair and shallow optimism?
7. Read 29:12–14. God promises, “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart... I will restore your fortunes and gather you” (29:13–14). The return from exile was a real event, yet it pointed beyond itself to a deeper restoration. How is this homecoming ultimately fulfilled in the spiritual restoration God accomplishes in Christ for His people, the true and spiritual Israel?
8. God promised, “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (29:13). What does whole-hearted seeking of God look like in your life right now, and where has your seeking become halfhearted or distracted?
9. Read 29:15–32. False prophets like Shemaiah opposed Jeremiah’s letter and tried to silence the true word of God, yet God declared He would judge them, for “he has spoken rebellion against the LORD” (29:32). How does this whole chapter display God’s holiness in judging

falsehood, His mercy in giving His exiled people a true word of hope, and His unwavering faithfulness to the covenant promises He fulfills at last in Christ?

10. Look back over this whole letter to the exiles, from the call to settle and bless Babylon, to the warning against false hope, to the promise of a future and a hope fulfilled in Christ. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is teaching you to live faithfully as a sojourner and to rest in His sure plans, even when the road home is long.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Daniel 9:1–3, where Daniel reads Jeremiah’s seventy years and turns to God in prayer and confession; 1 Peter 2:11–12, the call to live as “sojourners and exiles” with conduct so honorable that the pagans glorify God; Galatians 6:14–16, where those who walk by the cross are named the “Israel of God”; Romans 2:28–29, where the true Jew is one inwardly, by the circumcision of the heart; Hebrews 11:13–16, the saints who confessed they were strangers and exiles seeking a better, heavenly country.

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