

"God's Plan for Your Life"

Jeremiah 29:11

When I was searching for God in my early 20's, one of the statements that impacted me was this one: "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." And then Jer. 29:11 was used to back that up that which says,

¹¹ For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you; plans to give you a hope and a future.'

That was one of a number of verses that God used to lead me to faith in Christ. Of course, I was biblically illiterate and had no idea this verse was written to Israel who were being punished for their sinfulness and were exiled to Babylon! So then, what does this verse have to do with evangelism or having a wonderful life?

This is one of the biggest dilemmas we face when interpreting the Bible; how do we know when to apply a promise made to Israel in the Old Testament to us, the church, in the New Testament? And then, if we can apply it, how do we apply it? When we try to understand how God works with Israel and how He works with the church, we have to separate the differences and look for the common spiritual principles that God expects from both. The key to understanding the differences and similarities is covenant. God has made covenant promises to Israel and the church and loves us both and expects faith and obedience from both. So then, look for the spiritual bridges (principles) that we both share in order to know how to apply verses like Jer. 29:11 to us as well as for Israel. But we can't know how to do that until we understand the context of the passage first. What then is the context of Jeremiah 29?

Jeremiah 1:1 gives us the overall context of Jeremiah's life which is very helpful.

The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, ² to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. ³ It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

Jeremiah's ministry began under the last good king of Judah, Josiah. The 13th year of Josiah's reign was 627 BC. Josiah tried to lead Israel back to God after his grandfather Manasseh, did all he could to remove God from Israel. The Assyrians were the world power at the time and everyone paid them tribute if you wanted to survive. In 609 BC Pharaoh Neco of Egypt was passing through Israel to join the Assyrians to defeat the rising power, Babylon. Thinking Egypt was threatening him Josiah unwisely engaged them in battle even though the Pharaoh warned him that God told him to tell Josiah to stand down! (2 Chron. 35) Josiah was shot and killed in the battle. His son Jehoiakim took the throne and things got worse for Jeremiah. Meanwhile, the Egyptians and Assyrians were defeated by Babylon and its King Nebuchadnezzar.

Jeremiah's main prophetic (and unpopular) task was to warn the kings and people of Judah that God was tired of Israel's rebellion against Him and was going to fulfil what He promised back in Deut. 28-29 that He would send them to a foreign country if they persisted in disobedience. Now God gives them the address; Babylon. In 605 BC Nebuchadnezzar paid Jehoiakim a visit demanding he now pay Babylon tribute since Babylon defeated Egypt. For insurance, Nebuchadnezzar took Israel's

youngest and brightest leaders (Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego) to Babylon and told Jehoiakim to be a good boy. He was not. He was a godless, immoral king who decided in 598 BC to join with Egypt to try and overthrow Babylon. That didn't go well. Jehoiakim is dethroned and dies, his son Jehoiachin takes his place.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree and after 3 whole months Jehoiachin rebels against Nebuchadnezzar. An unhappy Nebuchadnezzar returns, surrounds Jerusalem, defeats Judah, takes Jehoiachin to Babylon along with 10,000 more prisoners all from Jerusalem (including Ezekiel) and takes the temple treasures with him back to Babylon. And this is what Jer. 29:1-4 summarizes for us. It is the year 597 BC. Jeremiah remains in Jerusalem and God instructs him to write a letter to those in Babylon to tell them how God expects them to live there. The context of the promise of v.11 is that

God's Promise was Given to Israel in Hardship

The irony of this is that this is a favourite verse for graduates, who are celebrating finishing high school and going off to college/university! Not realizing that this was originally given to God's people expelled from their country because of sin! Again vv.1-4 remind us why:

God sent Israel into exile because of rebellion (vv.1-4)

When we read Daniel's prayer of confession in Dan. 9, we see it is the nation in general who had sinned, turning away from God's laws and not listening to the prophets. Jeremiah had a tough ministry because very few people listened to his warnings.

As God writes the letter through Jeremiah, he doesn't remind them of their sinfulness. Instead He actually encourages them. He says in vv.4-5

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ 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.

God expects His people to grow in hardship (vv.5-6)

Build homes, make a good life, multiply in exile. Increase, do not decrease. Here's a spiritual principle for all God's people of all times; even though we may be experiencing difficulties in life, God expects us to grow and increase. And here we can legitimately say spiritually and evangelistically. Because v.7 says,

⁷ Also, 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."

God desires His people to witness to their oppressors (v.7)

Seeking the prosperity and welfare of Babylon means be an asset to the community. Serve the community where you live and be a positive influence – like we try here doing odd jobs for our neighbours, giving backpacks to needy children, cleaning up school grounds, the harbor or painting and repairing benches at the ball field. Show the community we care and earn the respect to be heard so we can share the gospel. And pray for our local leaders, pastors, churches, business owners and neighbours. We all benefit when the community grows.

Jesus, Peter and Paul all tell us to pray for our oppressors (Matt. 5:44; 1 Pet. 2:18; Rom. 12:21). Pray for those who disagree with us, who hurt us with their words and would like nothing more than to see us gone from the community. When we do this Jesus says, we are like “sons of our father in heaven”. In other words, we act like Jesus.

Why should we live like this? Aren't we supposed to separate ourselves from the world? From living as they do in sin but not from them physically. How else are they going to hear the gospel if we don't interact with them? The next few verses remind us of the broader context of Ch.'s 28-29;

⁸ 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. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the LORD.

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. 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. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ 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."

In Ch. 28 Jeremiah had a show down with a false prophet named Hananiah. Jeremiah had been told by God to wear a wooden yoke as a symbol that Israel would be under Babylon's yoke for some time. So, his message was often, 'Babylon's going to take you away. If you resist you will die but if you accept exile you will live.' Not a popular message. So Hananiah comes along and says 'This is what the Lord says, 'The exiled king and all the people will be back in two years!' Then he takes the wooden yoke off Jeremiah and symbolically breaks it. Jeremiah walks away. Soon God speaks to Jeremiah. Go tell Hananiah he will be dead in 2 months.

Promises like Jer. 29:11 are wonderful and we are to believe them. But we need to understand from this passage;

God's Promises Don't Come When We Want them **(29:8-14, 21-32)**

The exiles in Babylon were listening to false prophets there too, who were saying, 'God says we'll be home soon.' But God said through Jeremiah, it will be 70 years before you get home again. My promise will happen but not for 70 years. That's a lifetime. That's not a popular message. God's Word is not always popular. God's promises don't always come when we want them too.

Yet false prophets always say expect them now (vv.8-9)

God says stop listening to those people who claim they are speaking for Me and falsely say all His promises of blessing and prosperity are yours to have now. False prophets love to undermine biblical prophets by telling them they don't take God's Word seriously or they don't have faith. I like how Jeremiah did not respond to Hananiah when he claimed to have a word from God and broke the yoke. Jeremiah walked away and then heard from God and came back. He wanted to be sure he was responding appropriately.

And it didn't end when the exiles got to Babylon. Here in vv.21-32 Jeremiah speaks out against three false prophets in Babylon (can't get rid of these guys!) who all claimed Judah would be back very soon to Jerusalem and 'happy days would be here again!' Two of them were named Ahab and Zedekiah and Jeremiah said they would be handed over to Nebuchadnezzar (v.21). Their own immorality and lies would be their undoing. Then another false prophet named Shemaiah (vv.24-32) wrote letters to Jerusalem from Babylon saying Jeremiah was the cause of the exile, which is why he's hiding his sinfulness by telling the people to settle down and live in the land of Babylon. God gave Jeremiah a message for him too; Shemaiah would never have any descendants and he wouldn't live to see the end of the exile.

As frustrating as false prophets are today, God has a way of dealing with them in His own time and way. Jeremiah left it in God's hands to deal with. He stuck to God's Word and trusted God to work these things out as He always has. But they are popular because people want to hear good news. Optimistic words are not proof that they are God's Words.

So then what should we do about God's promises that haven't come true yet?

Keep believing until they do (vv.10-11)

God's words will not fail. They always accomplish the purpose for which they are sent. Vv.10-11 remind us of 4 things to remember about God's promises

They will come (v.10)

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."

God said the captivity will last 70 years. It started in 605 BC when Daniel and his friends were taken captive. In Daniel 9, Daniel is reading Jer. 29 and since he believed the 70 years were almost done, he prayed to God that he would do what He promised. And it came true. The Medes and Persians defeated the Babylonians in one night. 2 Chronicles ends with Cyrus the Mede's decree to send Israel back to their land.

Every fulfilled prophecy is a reminder that all God's promises will come true. God is batting 1.000. Why will they come true?

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."

A plan is a preconceived idea. The word literally means 'thoughts'. God's Word will come true

Because He thinks about us (v.11a)

God has many thoughts and ideas that He has already fulfilled and will bring about. If God is always working (according to Jesus in John 5:17) then He's thinking about how He's going to fulfill His promises for us. Which means He's always thinking about us. V. 11 '*I know the thoughts I have for you, thoughts to prosper you, not to harm you.*'

He is always for us (v.11b)

Paul said in Rom. 8:31-32, *'If God is for us, who can be against us?'* The reason we like this verse is because it reminds us that God thinks about His people. He had a plan for Israel, even though it included a 70-year removal from the land because He needed to do a work in Israel's life.

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.

Hope and a future. God's promises

Encourage us (v.11c)

Going to Babylon delayed the promises of God but it didn't cancel them out. God is working His plan in us; to conform us into the image of His Son Jesus so that we act a little more like Jesus today and talk a little more like Jesus today and think a little more like Jesus thinks. And those plans involve enjoying the fulfillment of His promised Word.

Israel's future and hope was a reference to their return to the land, which happened in 70 years. Why the wait?

So our relationship with Him is strengthened (vv.12-14)

What happens when we see God's Word fulfilled or happening in front of us or in someone else because we believed, we waited, we persevered? We were encouraged and our relationship with God is strengthened, so that we believe a little more and we pray a little more.

¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will [restore your fortunes] 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."

While God didn't completely 'restore their fortunes' like they had during the glory days of Solomon they were back and they would rebuild a smaller temple. They didn't have a king anymore, but now they were waiting for the Messiah. There is still a future day when Israel will experience the complete promises of God's Word when Messiah Jesus returns and established His rule from David's throne in Jerusalem, because God has promised them this. And in that day their relationship with God will be complete.

But, there is a sad note in this. Many did not live for 70 more years. That meant they never got to see the land again. They were believing God's promises so their children and grandchildren would experience them. Hebrews 11 is all about the heroes of faith who trusted God, believing in His promises even though most didn't live to see them. Doesn't mean they won't come true. It just means we have to wait and live **knowing** will come true, so those who follow us will model the same faith.

And one more important lesson to remember why God sometimes delays His promises for us, and is part of His plan for our welfare:

God is More Gracious than we Realize **(29:15-20)**

The Israelites who went into exile were the ones God was blessing. Because those who

remained in Jerusalem especially would experience the 'sword, famine and plague' that God caused through Nebuchadnezzar, when Judah under King Zedekiah rebelled one more time. This time Nebuchadnezzar had enough. He returned in early 588 BC, surrounded the city of Jerusalem and literally just waited for a year and a half while inside the city the people starved. The book of Lamentations records the horrific events of that year and a half. And then Nebuchadnezzar broke down the walls, broke down the temple and burned the city to the ground. All of a sudden exile looks pretty good. And they realized how gracious God was to those who He sent into exile.

Sometimes the hardships of life are to save us from even worse hardships and we realize anew we serve a gracious God. God's plans for Israel was to prosper them. That word is shalom. Shalom means to wish you good health and happiness and to have harmony with God and with people. Israel would experience this when they were right with God. That is always God's plan for His people to make us right with Him and with each other. Israel's failure resulted in exile and the loss of harmony with God and people. So He gave them time to work on that.

Get right with Me.

Seek the shalom of the community you live in.

Multiply by making more Jesus followers; literally of your children and spiritually of those who are lost.

Be encouraged. We have a great future and a great hope (now called eternal life through Jesus Christ). Our hope is rooted in promises like this one in Jer. 29:11. It is a reminder to God's people that His thoughtful plans for us are working toward our wholeness with Him and others so we will experience a close relationship with God. But it is also an invitation to those who don't know God to believe that God loves you and does think about you and wants you to experience His peace/shalom by confessing your sins and placing your faith in Jesus. And then experiencing His peace/shalom by obeying Him and growing in your relationship with Him, trusting His good plan to make you more like Jesus today.

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