

"Thank God for His Plan for ALL Your Life"

Jeremiah 29:1-20

1 Thes. 5:16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

That word "in" is a very small powerful word. It is not 'for' all circumstances but "in" all circumstances. Because there are many things we're not thankful for in life, but, if we've known the Lord for a while we have come to understand that God does not waste the unpleasant things in life for without them there are things we would have never learned or received.

We have been focusing on our 'citizenship in heaven' this year. That we belong to God. That our home is not here. That we are temporarily aliens and strangers. So we've been learning from the Word how to live here where we don't belong in a way that shows the world around us that we belong to God and live for His purposes and not just the purposes of this world.

A good illustration of this is Jer. 29. Here Jeremiah is directed by God to write a letter to God's people who have been taken captive to Babylon. They are literally aliens and strangers living in a land where they don't belong. How God instructs them to live in Babylon is no different to how He instructs us to live all of life on earth while we're waiting to go home to be with Him. [pray]

Jeremiah's ministry began in the 13th year of Josiah's reign 627 BC. Josiah, a good king, 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 that 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! Josiah was shot and killed in the battle. His son, godless Jehoiakim took the throne then (609) and things got worse for Jeremiah. Meanwhile, the Egyptians and Assyrians were defeated by Babylon and its King Nebuchadnezzar.

Jeremiah's main prophetic (and very unpopular) task was to warn the king 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, surrounded Jerusalem demanding he now pay Babylon protection money since Babylon defeated Egypt and told Jehoiakim to be a good boy. For insurance, Nebuchadnezzar took treasure from the temple and Israel's youngest and brightest leaders (like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego) to Babylon (Dan. 1:1). For 8 years Jehoiakim behaved but in 598 he arrogantly decided to join with Egypt to try and overthrow Babylon. That didn't go well. Jehoiakim 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 angry Nebuchadnezzar returns, surrounds Jerusalem, defeats Judah, takes Jehoiachin to Babylon along with 10,000 more prisoners (including Ezekiel) and takes them back to Babylon. And this is what Jer. 29:1-4 summarizes for us. It is the year 597 BC. Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem and God instructs him to write a letter to those in Babylon to tell them how to thank God even in exile. In exile! Why? God's people need to thank God that ...

Exiles and Disasters are Under His Control **(29:1-7)**

Jeremiah spent his ministry warning Judah that God had put up enough with their rejection of Him and worshipping other idols that He was going to send them according to Deut. 28 to a foreign country because He was going to destroy His own city (Jerusalem) and even His temple. This was grace because Jeremiah says going to Babylon will save you. If you stay here you will most likely die. This was of God even though the historical account is that Nebuchadnezzar took captive, yet Jeremiah speaks for God in v.4,

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

God brought about this disaster

Even though Israel was not sinless (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. They did not want to repent. God was faithful to His Word in Deut. 28 and He brought about this disappointing exile.

God is sovereign over our lives. In v.11 God says

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.

But those plans can also included exile and disappointment. Israel needed to see that their own sin caused the exile. Only when we humble ourselves before God can God work in our heart and perform the better than-our-own-plans He has for us.

Because we live in a sin-filled world that even the creation is affected by sin, many disasters and disappointments happen to God's people as well as the people who don't know God. But none of these things happen outside of God's sovereign control. For which, we should be grateful. If we're struggling to see what to thank God for in the disappointments of life we need to understand why He allows them to happen.

God writes the letter through Jeremiah and encourages them when He says in v.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.

The reason why we can thank God in the disappointment in our life is because

He uses them to help us grow spiritually (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. This is what saved them. Those who were left behind at home did not have it

better, much worse. The Babylonian philosophy was to use the people they captured to advance their own country. So in that environment God says you have the freedom to live and multiply and plant and build. See this as a gift in which you can still have families and even though the society you live in is godless and wants to change you into their way of thinking, you don't have to let that change you. You can use this time to draw closer to Me and raise your children and grandchildren to know Me and serve Me.

And not only grow spiritually and but also 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."

He wants us to reach others in life's difficulties (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 enemies/ 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" (Matt. 5:44-45) . In other words, act like Jesus.

But aren't we supposed to separate ourselves from the world? You can live in the community without living like the community. Big difference. How else are they going to hear the gospel if we don't interact with them? And Jeremiah next moves in that direction; don't be influenced by the wrong voices claiming to be from me.

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 'Thus says the Lord, 'The exiled king and all the people will be back in two years!' Then he takes the wooden yolk off Jeremiah and symbolically breaks it. Jeremiah walks away. Soon God speaks to Jeremiah. Go tell Hananiah he will be dead in 2 months.

The challenge of the exiles and disasters in our life is to thank God in them believing by faith that ...

His Promises Always Come True **(29:8-14, 21-32)**

The false prophets were in Babylon too, 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.

So we have to wait for many of them (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**. Jeremiah did not respond to Hananiah when he claimed to have a word from God and broke the yoke. Jeremiah walked away (hard) and then heard from God and came back. He wanted to be sure he was responding appropriately.

And here in vv.21-32 Jeremiah speaks out against three false prophets in Babylon 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 Israel's return.

False prophets are popular because people want to hear good news. But optimistic words are not proof that they are God's Words. Our challenge is to

Trust God's Word and not our desires (vv.10-11)

God's words will not fail. They always accomplish the purpose for which they are sent. Vv.10-11 remind us to that God's promises will eventually come true.

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.

The captivity started in 605 BC when Daniel and his friends were taken captive and ended in 536 BC when 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 "plans" literally means 'thoughts'. God's Word will come true because He thinks about us. 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

always thinking about how He's going to fulfil His promises. 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.'*

We like this verse 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, *plans to give you hope and a future.*

Babylon delayed the promises of God but it didn't cancel them out. It was part of His plan. Israel's future and hope was a reference to their return to the land, which happened in 70 years. Why the delay? Why the exiles? Why disappointments?

So we'll draw closer to God (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."*

God won't completely 'restore their fortunes' until Jesus returns. But they would be back home, rebuild a temple to wait for the Messiah. When Messiah Jesus returns and establishes His rule from David's throne in Jerusalem then their relationship with God will be complete.

But, they still had to wait 70 years for God's promises to kick in. That meant most never got to see the land again. They were believing God's promises so their children and grandchildren would experience them. They and we sometimes have to live by faith so that our children and grandchildren will see promises from God that we won't see in our lifetime. And if we don't like that then we're selfish. We're not here for ourselves. Life is not about you. Our faithfulness to God always serves those who follow us and we can set a great example for them so that they might be the generation that gets to experience the rapture and other promises from God.

And one more reason to thank God in life's disappointments. That is that ...

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

The Israelites who went into exile were the ones God was blessing. Those who remained in Jerusalem would experience the sword, famine and pestilence that God caused through Nebuchadnezzar, when Judah under King Zedekiah rebelled one more time. Nebuchadnezzar would return in 589 BC, surround the city of Jerusalem and literally just wait for almost 2 years and let the people starve. Lamentations records the horrific events of that time. Then they broke down the walls, destroyed 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 disappointments in life 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 you have harmony with God and with people and that all is well in life. Israel

experienced shalom 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 shalom 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 shalom 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 them and does think about them and wants them to know His peace/shalom by confessing their sins and placing their faith in Jesus.

And then experiencing more of His peace/shalom by obeying Him and growing in our relationship with Him, trusting His good plan to make all of us more like Jesus today.

* * * * *
If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at
olivet@rideau.net