

Text: Jeremiah 29:1-14

Title: "The Plans of the Lord"

INTRODUCTION

Open your Bibles to Jeremiah 29. As you're turning I want to encourage you to join us for our National Day of Prayer service this Thursday, May 3, at the Gladney Center in southwest Fort Worth, just behind Harris Hospital, at 6300 John Ryan Dr (different from worship folder). As you may recall this is also next door to the site of the new Planned Parenthood abortion clinic that is under construction. We'll pray for our nation, but we'll also pray for our life partners like the pregnancy centers and the adoption agencies like Gladney. Join us from noon to 12:50pm. Read Jeremiah 29:1-3.

Now we're studying the prophetic books of the OT, and we come today to one of the better known prophets ... Jeremiah. And if I were to ask you to stand and tell us your favorite Scripture passage, many of you would say it was Jeremiah 29:11, a verse I will get to a little later:

Jeremiah 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.

That is a very popular verse, for obvious reasons, but I would venture to say that not very many really know the context of this verse. You'll see that today.

Jeremiah is considered one of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets, second only perhaps to Isaiah. Jeremiah came along about 100 years after Isaiah. Isaiah prophesied primarily about the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Jeremiah's prophecies focus on the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the capital Jerusalem.

There are fifty-two chapters in Jeremiah, so there's no way we can cover this book in one message, but the verses I've just read provide a window for us into the historical situation that was going on at the time. Jeremiah lived through the reigns of five kings on the throne of David in Jerusalem, and he would see and prophesy about the invasion of the Babylonians, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the exile of most of the citizens of Jerusalem to Babylon.

It wasn't a fun time to be a prophet. In fact, Jeremiah wept out his prophecies. He is often called "the weeping prophet." He saw some terrible things looming on the horizon for God's rebellious people and he tried to warn them. The book is filled with Jeremiah's confession, brokenness and repentance over the sin of his people. Jeremiah's laments are probably also contained in the book of Lamentations, which records the prophet's deep sorrow over the destruction of Jerusalem.

Now it says...

Jeremiah 29:1 - This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles...

So Jeremiah preached sermons, wrote letters, and he even acted out the message that God gave to him. Like some of the other prophets, Jeremiah's personal life became a kind of parable of what God was trying to say to His people in this time.

ILLUSTRATION – Play Dough - One of those parables is found in Jeremiah 18 where he visits the potter's house. He stood and watched the turning of the potter's wheel as the clay yielded to the hands of the potter. There was a vision in the mind of the potter that was being shaped in the wet clay. But as the potter was shaping the moist clay the clay became marred. As he looked at the vessel being formed he realized that it didn't fit the vision that he had for that pot. What did he do? He took that clay and mashed it all down into a lump again and started over with it. He didn't give up on the clay. He started over. Jeremiah saw in that episode the plans of the Lord. The nation of Israel had been marred by their own sin and corruption, but God was not giving up on them. He would reshape them in order for them to fulfill His perfect plans for them.

So God's message through Jeremiah came through sermons and parables, but in this case we see he writes a letter. Notice the recipients.

Jeremiah 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.

So what we discern has happened in this time period is that the Jews who lived in the Southern Kingdom of Judah (Jerusalem) refused to listen to God's call to turn away from their disobedience and their idolatry. Now the full weight of God's discipline falls upon them. The Babylonians invaded Judah and Jerusalem carried off most of the citizens into exile in Babylon. Then the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, and the great Temple, the center of their religious life, was burned to the ground. This exile would last seventy years, then the Jews would be allowed to return to and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple.

I said that most of the citizens were carried off as captives to Babylon, but not all of them were. Jeremiah was allowed to stay behind in Jerusalem where he would communicate with the exiles in Babylon. So he composes this letter and ...

Jeremiah 29:3 - He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said:

Jeremiah 29:4 - This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

There are two things I want you to notice:

First, this is what the Lord Almighty says. We need a word from God for our lives. The Jews are in exile; they needed a word from God for their circumstances. You and I need a word from God for our circumstances. God wasn't through with them yet. The clay was marred in the hands of God, but He had plans to reshape them.

Second, this was the work of the Lord all along. The Lord said, “I carried you into exile in Babylon.”

APPLICATION #1 – Perhaps you have made a mistake, committed some sin, and as a result of that sin there have been some consequences ... an unexpected pregnancy, a boat-load of debt, a shattered marriage, or whatever. Perhaps you have wondered, “Am I doomed to simply live with God’s Plan B or Plan C for the rest of my life? Will I never feel that I am in the center of God’s will for my life?” In that sense you are like the Jews in exile in Babylon. Many of them probably wondered, “Does God have anything left for us. Is there any future or any hope for me?”

APPLICATION #2 – If that scenario doesn’t exactly fit your life today, the fact is that all of us as Christ-followers in the world today are living in a kind of exile. This world is not our home. We live in a fallen world that is filled with all kinds of bad stuff because of the sin disease that has infected all of creation. It’s easy for us to just think, “Well, I’m just going to have to ride this out until God takes me home to heaven.”

God has plans for your life. Have you stopped to consider the fact that as you look forward to the remaining years of your life, God has plans for you? Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles about their future. That was God speaking to them. God has given us His Word. He reveals His plans for us and He wants us to plan our lives according to His plans. Are you doing that? Some of you are graduating from high school, college or seminary. Are you praying about God’s plans? Some of you are nearing retirement? Are you praying about God’s plans? Some of you have a summer ahead of you. Are you praying about God’s plans?

So in Jeremiah’s letter, God shows the exiles...

1. WHAT HE EXPECTS FROM HIS PEOPLE

Jeremiah 29:5 - “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

Jeremiah 29:6 - 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.

Now a little more information is necessary here. There were some false prophets ... some men who were speaking, but they weren’t speaking from God ... who said, “Don’t worry. This exile will last a couple of years and then you’ll be back in your homes in Jerusalem.” Jeremiah, a true prophet, said, “No, this isn’t going to be a short thing. You’ll be there for seventy years, so settle down, plant and eat and have kids and grandkids and enjoy your life.

Here’s what God expects from His people:

- **Live productive lives (vv.4-6).**

Jeremiah 29:5 - “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

Jeremiah 29:6 - 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.

Enjoy your life, and in doing so serve the purposes of God. God put Adam and Eve in the Garden and said...

Genesis 1:28a - God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.

You see, this gives meaning to your everyday life ... to your homes and your work and your families. As you clean your house and as you go to work and as you do life with your family, know that you are fulfilling an important part of God’s plan.

ILLUSTRATION – I thought about this yesterday as we attend the graduation ceremonies for our daughter Ashley who completed her master’s degree. Our family was all there, and I found myself weeping for joy, along with all the other families. Thank God that this is all part of His plan.

Now not all of the Jews saw it this way. In fact, one of the psalms was composed in this era in Israel’s history:

Psalm 137:1-4 - 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?

You can’t sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land if you don’t see God’s plan for you in exile.

- **Be a positive influence (v.7).**

Jeremiah 29:7 - 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.”

This is what God expects from us as His people in the world where we live out our lives. This is what we will be doing on Thursday as we gather for National Day of Prayer. We are seeking the peace and prosperity for the land where God has placed us. And that will only happen as we, as God’s people, be who we are supposed to be, and do what we are supposed to do. Remember II Chron.7:14.

- **Follow godly counsel (vv.8-9).**

Jeremiah 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.

Jeremiah 29:9 - They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD.

There was a false prophet by the name of Hananiah who kept telling the people that it would be all over in a couple of years and everything would return to normal. Jeremiah heard from the Lord that it would be seventy years before they returned.

Note: Be careful not to just listen to people who tell you what you want to hear. Make sure you are hearing true godly, divine counsel. Not everyone who says they are speaking from the Lord are really doing so.

So in Jeremiah’s letter, God shows the exiles what He expects *from* His people, but also...

2. WHAT HE EXPECTS FOR HIS PEOPLE

God is saying, “Settle down. There is something huge I want to do for you while you are going through this season of discipline in your life.”

Proverbs 16:9 - In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

God has a future for His people. And it would be worked out according to His providential plan. Seventy years would pass. God works in seasons in our lives. You may look at your life and think, “This is the worst time of my life.” Do you see that God ordains these periods of time, and He has great expectations for us?

Jeremiah 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.

The circumstances of our lives cannot stop God from fulfilling His gracious promises for our lives. The Jews would return to their homeland; God guarantees it.\

ILLUSTRATION - I remember hearing the story of a man who was walking in a park where some kids were playing a sandlot baseball game. He struck up a conversation with the boy who was in right field and said, "What's the score?" He said, "They're ahead 54 to nothin'." And the man said, "54 to nothing? And you haven't called the ball game? Aren't you discouraged?" And he said, "Naw, we ain't had our turn at bat yet." Now that’s hope.

Dear brother and sister in Christ, we’re going home. Our home is not this world. God is moving us toward something bigger and better in Christ. Heaven is awaiting us, but in the meantime, God is working out something great. And it’s not just about a destination. It is a new relationship.

Jeremiah 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.

What is it that God expects for us through the difficult seasons of life? A new relationship which means we will...

- **Seek the Lord completely (vv.12-13).**

Jeremiah 29:12 - Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me,

Jeremiah 29:13 - You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

For years the Jews had chased after other gods and idols to fill the emptiness in their souls. God is using this season of discipline in their lives to teach them to look to Him.

- **Seek the Lord intensely (vv.12-13).**

Jeremiah 29:12 - Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.

Jeremiah 29:13 - You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Notice the words that the Lord uses to describe the intensity of their seeking: call upon me ... come and pray to me ... seek me.

- **Seek the Lord expectantly (vv.13-14).**

Jeremiah 29:13 - You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:14 - 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.”

CONCLUSION

God has promised that when we seek Him with our whole heart, we will find Him. I'm telling you, to find God in the midst of our sufferings and trials is the greatest thing that can happen. And when you find God you will find yourself rejoicing with Jeremiah in Lamentations:

Lamentations 3:22-24 - Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him."

If the Lord is your portion, then whatever happens in life you will be sustained by Him. He is faithful!