

A WORD TO THE EXILES

August 30, 2020

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I feel like Jeremiah 29:11 has become such a scriptural favorite over the years....“For I know the plans I have for you”. We see it quoted on everything from graduation cards and wall hangings. I have often wondered about why it has become so popular. Perhaps it’s because it reminds us that God is active; that God has an eye on each one of us; or that God is working something out for us or leading us to something. Certainly any and all of that may be the reason for the verse’s attraction. But I have sometimes wondered if everyone understands the context of this favorite verse.

It is written by the prophet Jeremiah who is speaking to the exiles in Babylon.

To the people who have been captured by an enemy nation

To the people who have had their lives completely upended....their religious identity and practices; their land taken away and them taken from their land; their customs and traditions interrupted....

And Jeremiah gives them this reassuring message that God’s got a plan for them.

But it’s so important to take into account the whole message.....what is said prior to the that promise. So let’s take a look at Jeremiah 29:4-14

⁴ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But 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. ⁸ For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream,^[a] ⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD. ¹⁰ For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon’s seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you

seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

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What a message to these exiles...that they get to come home!

But wait.....actually it's not them that get to go home ... but rather their descendants.

This is a different message than from other messages they had heard. For there were other people posing as prophets, claiming to speak for God and they were saying something else....

they were saying what the exiles wanted to hear:

That they could go home soon;

Those words of the false prophets and the diviners alluded to a promise that the people of God could avoid the hard work of building community; avoid the hard work of repentance; avoid the hard work of being remade as God's people and go home.

Now, mind you, this was the same hard work they were avoiding back home in Judah which seems to have gotten them in trouble in the first place....they were avoiding truly living as God's people.

Oh make no mistake, we all like to claim to be God's people, but actually doing the work of living as God's people is a whole other matter.

But Jeremiah gives a different word – he gives a true word from God. And that word was that the exiles would go home once their appointed time was over in Babylon

That would be in 70 years.....so it wasn't really them, but their descendants who would go back home. The "them" is a collective understanding of the people of Israel.

And while that must give them hope and peace that their collective identity will not be erased....and that they will be allowed to find God once again

but they have to seek God with all their hearts....I'm assuming that means with their whole being, with the way they live their lives, and not just with lip service.

This is what Jeremiah's prophecy is getting at. You have to actually live it out – being God's people and not just claim it.

and this larger message may be a bit difficult for them to take in....but God is clear that this message is life-giving if followed.

And the message includes getting settled in

And seek the welfare of that foreign city

*But 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*

In other words, if they want to survive, if they want to thrive, they have to take into consideration and work for the good of the whole

And that includes the good of the Babylonians who have taken them into captivity.

It begs a question of them:

*Will they?*

First they need to ponder what that even looks like.

It looks like settling in and not seeking escape....

Build houses and plant gardens and have children....

Be the change....instead of looking to go where it might be better (Canada/New Zealand), make it better where you are.

It looks like working to understand each other

Cultural competency....

Thinking of others' needs, not only your own....mark of true hospitality

Compromise

Getting away from the duality position of someone wins and someone loses. To get through the exile, it's going to take humility.

Then they need to consider what it's going to take to do all that. When I think about what it would take for me to live like that, I think it would take:

What Jesus taught: to pray for your enemies

What Paul taught the Philippians: Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,

Accepting and living with the reality that MLK stated: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

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Yes it's also a comforting word to heard of God's promise to them, a promise we have claimed in our days, "for I know the plans I have for you – plans for your welfare and not harm....."

The thing is – God's plans began in their exile.

The thing is - they needed to use their exile for God's purposes.

Perhaps the same is true today?

Which begs us to answer:

Will we use this time of exile for His purposes?

Will we seek the welfare of our city?

Will we settle in and pray for our enemies?

Let's pray:

God of the exiles – we offer our days of exile to you. Mold us and make us after your will. While we are waiting, yielded and still. Amen.