

“Life in Exile”
Jeremiah 29:1-14
January 17, 2016

INTRODUCTION:

We’re continuing to prepare for our study of Daniel by looking at the historical background found in Jeremiah’s prophecy. We come today to a letter written by Jeremiah to the exiles living in Babylon. This letter was written to the first of the three groups exiled to Babylon, in about the year 597 BC, a group that included Daniel. It is likely that Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles was not very popular in its day. We see in today’s passage the same thing we saw last week, that there were false prophets among the Jews who were saying something very different from Jeremiah. He said that God’s word was that the Babylonian exile would last seventy years, while the false prophets were saying it would be only two years. It is clear from the biblical accounts that the message of the false prophets was embraced while Jeremiah’s was rejected.

To help us get a feel for the difficult words of Jeremiah about a long exile, let’s update it a little. Imagine that ISIS grows in strength enough to invade America, and their army marches straight to Birmingham. They quickly conquer our city and take 4000 of our leading citizens back to Iraq in order to convert them to cultural and religious jihadists like them. Imagine that among the 4000 taken to Iraq are around 100 pastors, including your own pastor. Families have been divided, and there is great mourning throughout the city. The greatest desire on the part of everyone is for ISIS to experience a significant military defeat and for the exiles to be returned as soon as possible. When we update things in this way, we can begin to appreciate why Jeremiah’s letter would have been so unpopular. Not only did he say that the exile would be so lengthy that most of the people alive in Jerusalem at its beginning would not still be alive when it ended, but also that those in Babylon were to work to bring good to the place that had taken them into exile.

This passage is of more than historical interest to us because the New Testament says that Christians today are also exiles (1 Peter 1:1). Our homeland is the heavenly kingdom, the New Jerusalem, but for a time we are exiled to a land where we have little power and live among those who don’t love our God. Jeremiah’s letter to these sixth century BC exiles is just as applicable to us as it was to them.

I. An Exile’s Behavior

Jeremiah instructs the exiles to avoid two errors in their behavior: separation and assimilation. The command against separation is seen in the

command to seek the welfare of the city of Babylon. Since they will be there for a long time, Jeremiah tells them to engage in the kind of behaviors characteristic of permanent residents instead of short-term visitors. These behaviors include such things as building houses, planting gardens, and forming new families through the marriages of their sons and daughters. They are not to plot rebellions, form militias or strategize about how they might return to their homeland. Think about the different mindset you have about the house you own versus a hotel room you might stay in for a night. I remember staying in a hotel room several years ago where I noticed that there was no caulk around the edge of the bathtub. Water from the shower easily went into the space below the tub. Had that been my own home, I would have told everyone not to take a shower there until I could run to the hardware store for a tube of caulk. Our attitude toward our communities should be more like that of homeowners and less like those spending a night in a hotel.

Let me mention an application of this. In our individualistic, anti-institutional age, Christians have a great opportunity to bring good to our communities through voluntary, servant-leadership in our institutions. These institutions include such things as PTA organizations in our schools, youth sports leagues, neighborhood organizations and numerous other institutions. We are not to view the world as a sinking ship in which we limit our activities to saving as many as possible. Rather, we are to seek to save as many as possible through working for the welfare of our communities and its institutions, *and* through the message of the gospel.

A second error to be avoided in our behavior is that of assimilation into the worldly values of the godless community in which we live as exiles. The purpose the Babylonians had for bringing the Jewish leaders to Babylon was to convert them to Babylonian culture and religion. In his efforts to destroy God's people, Satan sometimes uses the blunt instrument of persecution and at other times the temptation to embrace worldly values. If the church begins looking just like the world, the church ceases to exist. So Jeremiah commands them to pray to the Lord. It is their God to whom they are to pray, not the Babylonian gods. And he tells them that it is their God who has a bright future for them. In this way he reminds them of the importance of holding on to their identity as Jehovah's people.

II. An Exile's Attitude

Two features of the attitude of exiles that we see in this passage are contentment and love. Let's look first at contentment. The mere fact of an exile of seventy year's duration requires acceptance of that fact and contentment with God's will in the midst of that. Note that the activities described here all require patience over a long period of time. The building of houses, the planting

of gardens and the forming of new families are not accomplished in a day. All require long-term outlooks, patience and hard work over a long period of time. Contentment results when you accept that your life will be like this for a long time and when you come to believe that this comes from God. Someone has said that if you believe you need to move even one inch in order to be happy, you will never be happy. As we live our lives as exiles, we are not to be always waiting for our circumstances to change before we can really start living life. Instead, we are to accept our current circumstances as coming from the hand of God and find his meaning in those circumstances.

The second attitude that is to characterize the outlook of the exile is love for our enemies. We must not forget that the Babylonians were the enemies of Israel and of God. From the beginning of the Bible to the end, Babylon is a metaphor for all that is wrong with the world. The first appearance of Babylon in the Bible is at the tower of Babel, where humanity sought to make themselves great apart from God, to the point that the continuance of the human race required God's judgment in the form of confused languages to prevent the success of their efforts. The final appearance of Babylon is in Revelation 18, where it represents the city of man in its pride, greed and violence. Yet God tells these exiles to pray for their enemies.

He also tells them that they are to pursue the welfare of these enemies, **“for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”** When Babylon does well, the exiles will do well too, and when Babylon does not do well, the exiles will suffer. That sounds to me like the exiles are being told to get emotionally involved with their enemies to the point that they genuinely desire good for them. It reminds me of parental love. Children have the unique ability to bring great joy or great pain to their parents. If our children are doing well, we as their parents experience joy. If our children are suffering, as was the case with one of our children this week, then our hearts break for them. This is the kind of love commanded by Jeremiah. It is commanded by him because it is God's kind of love. There are two missionary examples in the Old Testament when citizens of Israel leave their nation to go to pagan nations to bring God's life-giving message. The first one is described in the book of Jonah, when God's prophet was sent, against his will, to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria. The second one is right here. Instead of being delivered by a whale, they are delivered by the Babylonian army. But the result is the same, as God's people find themselves in the land of their enemies, where they are given the task of praying for them and teaching them about the true God.

Let's consider an application of this command to love our enemies. A New Testament version of this same command can be found in Paul's instructions to Timothy to pray **“for kings and all who are in high positions”** (1 Timothy 2:2), none of whom at this time would have been Christians. But they were to pray for God's blessings upon them **“that we may lead a peaceful and quiet**

life, godly and dignified in every way.” Paul even says two verses later that this leads to people coming to salvation in Christ. I wonder how much good would be done if Christians spoke as many words of prayer for God’s blessing upon our president as we spoke words of criticism.

III. An Exile’s Faith

The main verse that speaks to our faith is the often-quoted verse 11. After promising to bring them back to their land after seventy years, God says through Jeremiah, **“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.”** We cannot survive as exiles without believing that God’s plans for us are good, and that his good plans are not ruined even by the challenges of living in exile. Let’s think about this verse more carefully.

The first thing I notice about it is that God is a planner who uses his planning skills to bring good to his people, not evil. A couple of weeks ago, Wendy and I went to Atlanta to help our daughter and son-in-law prepare their nursery for the birth of their son and our grandson. I can tell you that a great deal of planning has gone into that room and all of its furnishings, both by my daughter and my wife. And these plans have been borne of great love and have been carried out with great excitement. Though this would never happen, imagine that when our grandson, Hastings, is born, he is able to speak the very day he comes home from the hospital. And imagine that he looks around at his nursery and says, “What, is this the best you can do? You must not like me very much if you thought that I would want a dresser like that in my room.” Imagine the hurt that would come to his parents were that to happen. Yet that’s exactly the response Adam and Eve made to God and all his plans for their home in paradise. “God, you must not care for us if you would deny us the fruit from that tree in the middle of the garden.” And that is the same response we give to God when we complain about the challenging circumstances of our life in exile. “God, is this job, this spouse, this body the best you can do for me?” And God says to us, “I have been planning for you, my son, my daughter, and my plans for you are good. I know how to bring you home, and sometimes the road home is marked by suffering. But even that suffering lies within my good plans.”

Notice too that believing that God’s plans for us are good results in a future and a hope. As exiles, it is critical that we remember how good our future is. What if I came to you and asked you if you would be willing to go through six months of intense pain and suffering? Probably all of us would be able to answer that question quite easily. “No, I don’t choose to go through six months of intense pain and suffering.” But then suppose I add these words. “You have cancer, and the six months of pain and suffering will come in the form of

chemotherapy that almost always cures your type of cancer.” With that information, most of us would change our answer to a “Yes.” The difference is a future hope. As Christians, we have a home awaiting us that is described as a place of everlasting joy, among many other descriptions. God knows how to bring us there.

I can summarize the kind of faith God speaks of here with an application. This application is summarized in a phrase that many of you have heard from me in the past. We are to be characterized by a non-anxious presence. We are to be lovingly present in the place God has assigned to us, not withdrawing and isolating ourselves. But we are to be present as those who trust in God and are therefore not filled with anxiety. When we are in a difficult situation, our tendency is to become either non-anxiously absent or anxiously present. We become non-anxiously absent by withdrawing, by giving up, or by writing people off. We become anxiously present by taking control and trying to force something to happen. So imagine that you have a spouse who is not very spiritually sensitive. Perhaps your spouse only attends church with you when no better option presents itself, never reads the Bible or prays, and thinks it very generous to drop a twenty dollar bill in the offering plate every couple of months. One unbelieving response would be to save yourself some pain by giving up and not letting yourself ever hope for change. That’s the non-anxious absence. Another unbelieving response would be the anxious, controlling presence. You may try to talk your spouse into the kingdom or arrange for others to do so or leave literature around that you hope will be read. But if we believe in the good plans of God and his ability to lead us along the road back to paradise, we will be non-anxiously present. We will stay in the pain of a disappointing relationship that we believe God has called us to, even if the marriage lasts 70 years, like Judah’s exile. And we will hope for God’s good work in our spouse.

CONCLUSION:

There’s one more point I want to make from this passage. It’s a point Jeremiah made in something he wrote later in the book of Lamentations. **“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness”** (3:21-23). God’s people are in exile in Babylon because of their own sin. Yet God is still seeking them, still speaking to them, and still encouraging them with his promises. Perhaps you are in a far country today because of your own sin, having wandered far from the Lord. I want you to know that God is able to bring you home no matter how far you may have wandered. Coming to him in faith is like pushing the “Home” button on your navigation system. No matter where you are, he will bring you home.