

Hope For The Hopeless

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Date: 27 August 2023

Preacher: Phil Pickett

[0 : 0 0] If you could turn with me to Jeremiah chapter 29. If you need to use the index, that's fine. We don't often maybe turn to the prophets to read Jeremiah.

Jeremiah chapter 29 is also on the screen there. I'm going to read verses 1 to 14. These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

This was after King Jehoiachin and the Queen Mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and all the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Elisai, the son of Shafan and Gamariah, the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah the king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon.

It said, Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Build houses and live in them.

Plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters. Take wives to your sons and give your daughters in marriage that they may bear sons and daughters.

[1 : 1 9] Multiply there and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray for the Lord on its behalf for its welfare. You will, for in its welfare, you will find your welfare.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you and do not listen to the dreams that they dream. For it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name.

I did not ascend them, declares the Lord. For thus says the Lord, When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

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. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will hear you.

You will seek me and find me and when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, declares the Lord. And I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord.

[2 : 2 3] And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. Well, the T-verse that we are looking at this evening is Jeremiah 29 verse 11.

Let me just read it one more time. 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. And it is a Bible verse that I suspect many of you know.

It is precious to many Christians. You will find it on fridge magnets, on calendars, on a frame on a wall maybe. It is also well known outside the church. You might not know, but it is the second most searched verse on Google after John 3.16.

So why is that? Why is Jeremiah 29.11 such a precious verse? I do not want to suggest because it is full of hope. It promises for one thing, control amidst chaos.

That phrase for I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord. And we read that and maybe everything is spiraling out of control. Maybe we are just simply faced with a future of unknowns.

[3 : 31] Or there is times when we just want reassurance. Because even if we do not know what is going on, we want to know that someone else knows what is going on. Maybe you have just started secondary school and feel a bit overwhelmed.

Maybe you are moving house. Maybe you are retiring. Maybe you are starting a new job. All kinds of things. Maybe these things are coming in five years time or have just happened. But in the midst of that you ask what am I supposed to do?

Maybe you are scared. And it is reassuring then to look at this verse for I know the plans I have for you. It is this control amidst chaos, isn't it?

And as well as control amidst chaos, there is peace amidst the pain. There are plans for welfare and not for evil to give a future and a hope. Chaos on unknowns are often accompanied by times of trial.

Times when we need reassurance that there is light at the end of the tunnel maybe. Maybe there is the death of a loved one. Maybe there is a notice of unemployment.

[4 : 32] A sudden unexpected diagnosis. All kinds of things can not only cause our plans to be upturned in the air, but also cause us worry and fear and pain.

We can wonder what is God doing? We turn to this verse for I know the plans I have for you. It declares the Lord. Plans for welfare and not for evil to give you a future and a hope.

Control and peace. This is a precious verse because it offers hope for the hopeless. And even if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian this evening, you would have had times when you have craved peace, where you have craved control amidst chaos and pain.

Maybe I was thinking about what it feels like when life just goes totally wrong. Maybe it feels like you are a bin that has been turned upside down and shaken out. Your life just feels like it has gone everywhere.

It is just a mess. It is just too much in your head. But where do you go if you are not trusting in Jesus? You are listening online. You have just tuned into the Calaway Free Church. You don't even know anything about Christianity.

[5 : 45] But what would you say your hope is? Where do we go in those moments? Where do we go for hope if it is not Jesus? Is it solid? Will it work?

I wonder what you think of Jeremiah 29 and 11. Whether you are a Christian or not, maybe you read this verse and you don't think this sounds really hopeful. Maybe you read this verse and you think this sounds too good to be true.

And you think, look, I am a realist. I have been around the world. I have been through life. I have seen things. And this plans and welfare, not for evil.

A future and a hope, that sounds nice, but maybe that is just an emotional crutch. You have seen the mess of the world and you say, actually life doesn't have happy endings like this verse seems to suggest.

Not everyone gets well, families split apart, and everyone dies in the end. Maybe that sounds a bit depressing, but I can understand if someone comes to this verse and says, that doesn't seem realistic.

[6 : 47] And it is a good question because Jeremiah 29 is a precious verse. It holds out an amazing hope, but it can also be misunderstood. But I would rather than say it is too good to be true.

I would like to suggest that if we handle it carefully, we can see it is far better than we can ever imagine. It is hope for the hopeless, and that is our title for this evening.

But to help us to see why this is so precious, we are going to ask three questions. First, what is the situation? Second, why is it written? And then why is it written for us? So first of all, what is the situation?

To understand any sentence, whether in the Bible or in any book, we need to read it in context. So just to illustrate that, imagine many of you are familiar with that line, and I would love this still, my dear, till all the seas gang dry.

Where is that from? My love is like a red, red rose. And we know that. And it is a beautiful piece of poetry, and it is a wonderful commitment of love, isn't it?

[7 : 52] But when we read it in its context, when we read it with the whole poem, it can have greater depth. Because you read, for example, that last paragraph there, and I will come again, my love, though it were 10,000 miles.

This isn't just a statement of love. This isn't just something nice that someone says at the end of a date, when they say goodbye or if they are dropping someone off. This is the kind of line that is said as someone is about to board a ship, and they are going to be away for months, maybe years.

It gains greater depth when you see that line in its context. It gains greater depth and meaning. And my love says the same with Jeremiah 29.11. When we see the situation, these words of comfort and peace gain an even greater depth and give us a greater hope.

So what is the situation? Well, if you look at Jeremiah 29.1, you will see that this verse in Jeremiah 29.11 is part of a letter that Jeremiah is sending to the exiles who are in Babylon.

Now, just so you can know how they would have felt receiving this letter, I want you to imagine that you are one of those exiles in Babylon. It's the year 597 BC.

[9 : 05] You're an Israelite. You're part of God's chosen people, but it doesn't feel much like that. You've heard stories, maybe you've sat around the fire with, and the old people have told you stories about the good old days.

The good old days they can't even remember, because it's about two centuries ago, when King David and King Solomon were on the throne in Israel. Those were the glory days, when Israel was one independent and prosperous kingdom.

But it's all gone downhill since then. After Solomon died, the kingdom split in half. I don't know if that borders matter anymore, because a little bit after that, the whole of the northern kingdom was taken into captivity.

And then in 721 BC. And if you're reading this then, you're part of Judah. You're part of that little remaining two tribes that was left for a bit longer. Unlike Israel, they had a few good kings, so they lasted a little bit longer.

But their temptation was always to cozy up to one of the big superpowers that was next to them, either Egypt in the south, often Egypt in the south. But shortly before this letter was written, Jeremiah wrote this letter.

[10 : 13] The Babylonians had swept down, defeating the Assyrians and Egyptians. And so the king, Jechiniah, who was the king of the time, had decided, instead of Egypt can't support me anymore, I'm going to turn to Babylon.

For three years, he decided to be subservient. That's when Daniel and his friends went off in the first deportation. But then he rebelled again. And so surprise, surprise, Babylon comes down and crushes Israel.

And you see a bit of how bad that is in 2 Kings 24, which is, I think, is going to come on the screen. If you just look at a few of those verses in 2 Kings 24, you see the king of Babylon carried off all the treasures of the house of the Lord.

He carried away thousands of captives, the royalty, the craftsmen, the metal workers, basically everyone, except, you can see at the end of verse 14, the poorest people of the land.

Why am I saying all this? It doesn't sound like boring history, or maybe you love it, but the situation is really dire. If you're reading this letter that Jeremiah sent, you've just arrived in a foreign country after traveling hundreds, or if not thousands, of miles.

[11 : 25] Your relatives and friends are dead. The city that you used to live in has been burnt to the ground. And everything is just grim, and it seems pretty hopeless.

And there doesn't seem to be any glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. Saying that, though, even at this difficult time, some people were still saying that there is hope.

So even in this situation where these exiles have just arrived in Babylon, everything seems grim, some people are still saying there's hope. Jeremiah isn't a very hopeful book. He's often called the Weeping Prophet.

But what's interesting is that some of the characters who speak of hope aren't actually the good guys. So by the time Jeremiah was prophesying, Israel was rotten to the core.

If you look at Jeremiah 7, which I'll just stick up on the screen next, you can see just how bad they were. They would go out murdering, committing adultery, all these things, offering sacrifices to Baal, offering their children a sacrifice even, then running back into the temple and saying, we're safe, we're delivered.

[12 : 33] But instead of challenging them, these false prophets were offering them a false hope, saying, ah, no, you're fine. What you're doing isn't that bad. Sin isn't that serious.

Don't worry about judgment. And that's best seen maybe in the chorus that's repeated throughout Jeremiah. Next slide. Joe, again and again this comes up, from the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain.

Prophets and priests alike, all practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. Peace, peace, they say, when there is no peace. So you've got this situation of utter hopelessness in Babylon.

But maybe just to make it even worse and more confusing, you've got these prophets offering a false hope, who first of all were saying, ah, Babylon's never going to come and actually conquer.

But who now that Babylon have come are saying, it's not going to last that long. You might be in Babylon, but you'll be back soon. Within two years you'll be back. In Jeremiah, in just the previous chapter in Jeremiah 28, Jeremiah is walking around with a big yoke on his neck, saying you're going to be under Babylonian slavery for a while.

[13 : 43] And this guy called Hananiah comes up and breaks his yoke in half and says it's only going to be two years. And that's this, that's the false hope that's being offered. Your sin isn't that serious.

It's just going to be two years in Babylon. That's the false hope that's being offered. It's downplaying sin, it's downplaying God's judgment. And it's saying that you're just going to be in exile for a small amount of time.

And that then brings us to Jeremiah's letter. Because it's our second point, why is this written? Because first reason that Jeremiah is writing all this is to confront that situation. He's not writing into a vacuum.

He's writing to confront these false prophets who are saying sin isn't that serious. You'll be back in no time. This exile doesn't really matter. Let me just read again from verse 4.

It says, While the false prophets are downplaying sin, the exile won't last long.

[14 : 57] Jeremiah is saying the opposite. He's saying the exile isn't a mistake. We might think when he talks about God being in control and God's plans, he's going to be talking about all good plans.

But part of what he's saying is God's plan is for you to be in exile. The exile's not a mistake. And it's not a holiday. Don't just treat it as two years. Prepare for the long haul when he's saying build houses and get married.

He's saying you're going to be here for life. Your children are going to be here for life. So prepare to be in Babylon for the rest of your life.

Jeremiah's message contains a tough truth. You're on exile, not on holiday. We might think that sounds harsh, but we need to remember that is countering the false prophets.

In verses 8 to 9, he says, Don't listen to those deceivers who are trying to deceive you. Sorry, diviners who are trying to deceive you. Israel weren't just being put on the naughty step in their exile.

[15 : 59] They were being, for decades, they had rejected God's laws. They had rejected his commands. They had rejected him as king. Time and time again, he had called them back through the prophets. He'd given them chance after chance after chance.

But in the end, they kept projecting God. And in the end, he gave them what they wanted. They were completely cast out from his sight.

Exile was a terrible reminder of the terrible consequences of rejecting God. And in some way, it's not a new story. It's a rerun of the story that's been going from the beginning, when Adam and Eve enjoyed God's rule and blessing as his people, but then they disobeyed him and they were exiled from Eden.

You might say then all humanity by nature is exiled from God. But we confirm that exile in our sin. We show that we're Adam and Eve's descendants as we too sin.

And by nature, we are all exiled from God. And as in Jeremiah's day, false prophets, you could say, even today, a bound to say, it's not that bad.

[17 : 07] And or even you just deny that we're even in exile. We even deny that we are cast away, that by nature we are away from God.

Jeremiah's tough truth was important to the exiles then to remind them that they were in exile from God. It's important for this world now that humanity by nature is in exile.

By nature without Jesus, we're all exiled from God. But Jeremiah wasn't just writing to confront the false hope. He was also writing to offer a true hope.

And that's where we come to our key verse for today. Let me just read again verse 10.

He declares the Lord, and I'll bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. Those famous words of Jeremiah 29, 11 aren't just words of generic hope.

[18 : 30] They're words that they're the best words that the exiles in Babylon could hear. God's saying, I'm bringing you home.

He's bringing them back to himself. And verse 11 pays a key part in that promise. On its own, we might be excused to think that when God says, I know the plans I have for you, plans for welfare and not for evil to give you a future and a hope.

On its own, we might be excused for thinking that God is just promising good harvests, no enemies, a joy for life. And you might say on one level he is. That word welfare is the Hebrew word shalom.

And shalom could be translated as wholeness or fullness or peace. It's a word that's laden with significance. It goes far beyond just having a good life in the here and now, having a good life in just the next summer even.

At its heart, shalom is speaking of the end point of God's mission. It's what you get when God creates the world and he calls it good and there is rest, there is peace, there is shalom.

[19 : 40] It's the end purpose of all of creation, of new creation that the world will once more be whole and at peace. And sometimes people speak of that shalom, whether they use the word or not, that idea of future, that idea of peace and prosperity and harmony in society.

And they speak of that as, well, humanity is searching for all the time. And people speak of it as if it's something that, well, maybe we can achieve.

But fundamentally shalom has God at its heart. The welfare and hope that is promised in verse 11 can't be gained without God.

This is, creation is only made whole when it's made whole in God. Humanity, human relationships are only made whole when they revolve around God. When God is promising a taste of Eden there, that Eden can only be restored if it's restored with God.

As a promise to exercise though, it has so much more meaning. It's not just good harvests, you know, promising them good harvests in the promised land is nothing unless they are brought back to the promised land.

[21 : 00] You might as well be saying to someone who's in prison, I put some flowers on your dining room table at home. That means nothing unless they first are told, unless they're released from prison and brought home.

That's why verse 11 is so important to read in its context. It's the promise of bountiful blessing in Eden as it were. But it's surrounded by a promise to bring them back to that.

So let's just bring this home then to the 21st century. Why was this written? Why was this written for them? Why is this written for us? That's a very deliberate heading in some ways because the first audience that God was speaking to was the people of Israel, was the people who were exiled in Babylon.

But amazingly the apostle Peter can tell us in 1 Peter 1 verse 10 that the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours, searched and inquired carefully. And verse 12, it was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you.

So Peter is saying when Jeremiah was writing, he wasn't just writing for the Babylonians, he was writing for you. You Peter's readers and us today.

[22 : 14] And he can say that because Jeremiah, the words that God was giving Jeremiah to write, weren't just, didn't find their ultimate fulfillment in the people coming back from Babylon to the promised land.

They found the ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. We saw how Israel's exile from the land is a rerun of our exile from Eden.

Adam and Eve and all the generations after them being sent out from God's presence in Eden. Well, Jeremiah's promise of return is the reverse of that.

And while it was fulfilled in part in 536 BC, what after 70 years, the first exiles returned. You can read about that in Ezra and Nehemiah.

While that was fulfilled in part then, it was never properly fulfilled. That never lived up to what Jeremiah was saying.

[23 : 12] They might have rebuilt their homes, they might have got some food. But when they, if you read through Ezra and Nehemiah, it's always a disappointment. The temple, the shadow of what it was supposed to be, there's still enemies attacking them.

There's still all kinds of problems. Eden wasn't restored then. And that's because Jeremiah's prophecy points beyond that little return to the greater return that Jesus brings.

To the return not from a physical exile, but an exile away from God. And it can, it's a return that can only happen when God himself comes and leads the people out of exile.

And we see that when Jesus announces his mission in Luke chapter 4. He says, the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. To set a liberty, those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus is saying that my mission is to carry out the new exodus from exile.

[24 : 19] My mission is to bring people back from exile. All that language of liberty to the captives and freedom for the oppressed. That's what it's harking back to.

Jesus is going to do what Jeremiah's prophecy ultimately pointed to. And the good plans then that Jeremiah 29 is speaking of. It's easy to, we can often personalize them and think these are good plans that God has for me.

I mean, that verse actually is always in the plural. I know the plans I have for you, that you is in the plural. Jeremiah was never speaking to one person about their own specific path.

He was speaking to Israel about their redemption from exile as a people, but ultimately redemption in Jesus Christ. He's talking about something far better than just a personalized plan of comfort and prosperity.

He's speaking about a global promise for rescue from sin and salvation and back bringing people back to Eden.

[25 : 28] The return from exile though is a now but not yet event. That plan, that speaking of plans to prosper.

And we know that we don't see that fully in this life. And we know that in this life everything isn't suddenly fixed. We do come immediately when we trust in Jesus into a relationship with God as our Father, but Eden isn't fully restored.

And Peter recognizes that when he calls his readers elect exiles. We'll look at that phrase a little bit more in a few weeks time maybe. But Peter is capturing that dual tension in the Christian life.

Both that we're exiles in that by nature we're separated from God. Eden isn't restored yet, but we're also elect. We're no longer exiles because we are separated from God.

We're exiles because this world is no longer our home. And because our home is now with Christ if we're trusting in Him. We still of course live as exiles when in this world this world is not our home.

[26 : 40] But we remember that we're elect. We remember that we're looking forward to being with Christ. And like Jeremiah holds out that hope of return, that hope of peace.

I love how Peter does the same thing later on in verse three. He says, Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power being guarded through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

That's what Jeremiah 29.11 is pointing towards. Not a personalized plan of comfort, but an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade.

You know, any which is far better than any material prosperity, all of that's going to decay. All of that's going to be here today, gone tomorrow. What it's pointed to is something far better.

It's an inheritance that is being kept for us, and I love verse five. We're also being kept for it. There's that double seal. God is guarding the inheritance for us.

[27 : 58] He's keeping us for that promised inheritance. That truly is the far better, the best hope that could be imagined. It's a promise for everyone who puts their trust in Christ.

And that's vital to emphasize. Jeremiah 29.11 is such a lovely verse about God's control and about the peace and comfort that he offers.

It would be tempting to hold that out to anyone and everyone as a promise for them. But the blessings of Eden restored can only be enjoyed by those who have been brought back to Eden.

In other words, you have to belong to Jesus Christ to enjoy the blessings that come with that. If the people didn't come back from exile, they couldn't enjoy being in the promised land.

If we don't belong to Christ, then we can't enjoy the blessings of being in his new creation. But that promise is also open.

[29 : 00] It's a wonderful verse. It's about hope for the hopeless. And it's a promise that we can hold out to people that if you do put your trust in Jesus, then that Eden restored, that new creation, that is far better than anything the exiles could imagine.

That is yours. If you take hold of Jesus, he has opened the way of a better exile for us to come back to God, to belong to him, to be in his new creation.

Return to Eden. So I return to God, Eden restored. That's the plan that God has for everyone who's in Christ. That's our future and our hope. Let's pray.