

## Plans to Prosper You

Jeremiah 29:1-14

Rev. Brian Bill

June 3-4, 2017

Some verses that are taken out of context make us smile, like this one from 1 Corinthians 15:51 often found above changing tables in church nurseries around the country: ***“We shall not all sleep, but we all shall be CHANGED.”***

Other verses taken out of context should make us shudder when we realize who said them, like this one from Luke 4:7: ***“If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine.”*** This is what Satan said to Jesus when he was trying to tempt Him.

That reminds me of a pointed post called, “Beware the Instagram Bible” by Jen Wilken. Here’s part of what she wrote:

*Beware the Instagram Bible...those filtered frames festooned with feathered verses, adorned in all manner of loops and tails, bedecked with blossoms, saturated with sunsets, culled and curated just for you. Beware lest it become for you your source of daily bread. It’s telling a partial truth...*

*Its perfect squares are friend to the proverb, the promise, and the partial quote, leaving laws, lists, land allotments, and long-stretching lessons to languish off-screen.*

*It comforts but rarely convicts.*

*It emotes but rarely exhorts.*

*It warms but rarely warns.*

*It promises but rarely prompts.*

*It builds self-assurance but balks at self-examination.*

*If the prosperity gospel offered us all the things, the Instagram gospel offers us all the feels. It preaches good news in part, but we need the whole. It may move us in the moment, but it cannot sustain us through the storm.*

My fear is that while our text for today from Jeremiah 29:11 has been copied and calligraphied on plaques and posters, it has not always been clearly understood in context: ***“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.”***

God has used this verse in many of our lives to fan our faith to help us hang on with hope in hopeless situations. No doubt these words are a literal lifeline for many going through tough times. My aim today is that by considering this text in context, our understanding and appreciation will grow in depth and breadth so we can apply this text to our individual contexts.

But first, we might need to do some deconstructing before we can reconstruct what it really means. Check out what God wanted Jeremiah to do in 1:10: ***“See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”*** Instead of plucking this verse out of context, we’re going to plant this passage in the garden of God’s glorious grace.

Here’s a summary of what we’re going to learn today: *God will not always do what we desire but He will always do what He decides.*

This is sermon #7 in our series we’re calling CONTEXT – and we have seven more to go! This is a good time to go back to the foundation we laid in week one: *Work hard at handling the Word of God because how we handle God’s Word determines whether we’ll be an approved worker or an ashamed wanderer.* If we want to get it right, we must go after it with all our might – by staying hungry and working hard.

### **Considering the Context**

In the first sermon of this series we established the importance of asking *who*, *what*, *when*, *where* and *why* questions. Let’s do that now.

#### **Who?**

We’ll start with Jeremiah himself. Jeremiah was both a prophet and priest who ministered for 40 years during the reigns of 5 different kings. He’s been called the “weeping prophet” because of all the pain he experienced while proclaiming God’s message. His refrain was one of repentance but the people rejected both the message and the man. In fact, we know of only two converts. The book that bears his name is considered one of the “Major Prophets.”

We're also introduced to the Babylonians, who were a ruthless and barbaric people. They were the superpower and the terrorists of the ancient world, functioning much like ISIS does today. Their leader's name was Nebuchadnezzar. Because of the idolatry of God's own people, God used the Babylonians to discipline and destroy Jerusalem.

## What?

The Book of Jeremiah reads more like a notebook or scrapbook of news clippings that are not necessarily chronological. The book is part sermon and part satire, containing both prophecy and preaching. Jeremiah calls for repentance over 100 times in his text as he warns people of impending judgment while offering grace and mercy if they would but turn back to God.

I should give full disclosure – this is one of my favorite books! Shortly after I got saved, I remember being out on my parent's patio reading about how Jeremiah preached faithfully and was pummeled as a result. After being put in stocks and thrown into a dark and dank well he thought briefly about just giving up. But then he wrote these words in 20:9: ***“But if I say, ‘I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name,’ then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I am weary of holding it in, and I cannot endure it.”*** I committed this to memory in the NASB and have made it my life verse.

Here are a couple more verses that have had a deep impact on my life...

- Jeremiah 1:4: ***“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”*** We see once again the Bible's ethic of life – God knows the preborn even before they are born! I'm excited that we're participating in the Baby Bottles for Life project for Pregnancy Resources again. I've already filled up three and am working on number four. BTW, you can also give through the Edgewood App if you don't have change.
- Jeremiah 2:13: ***“For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”*** This verse became the basis for the *Soul Satisfaction* tract that I wrote several years ago – *we will never be satisfied until we find our satisfaction in the Savior.*

Please turn to Chapter 29, where we will see that this chapter is actually a letter. Look at verse 1: ***“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.”*** In verse 2 we see that the king and queen mother, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, along with the craftsmen and metal workers all were forced to leave. That left no leaders to organize a rebellion and no craftsmen to rebuild.

## **When?**

I don't want to gloss over the dates but I also don't want your eyes to glaze over, so I will share just the most important elements. The first thing to know is that God's people were grouped into 12 tribes. After the death of Solomon, a division occurred with the 10 tribes in the north known as Israel and the two tribes in the south known as Judah.

- In 722 BC, God sent the nation of Assyria to attack Israel and disperse the ten northern tribes. They are known today as the “10 lost tribes of Israel.”
- Judah should have learned their lesson by watching what happened to their brothers and sisters in the north, but unfortunately their idol worship led to God mobilizing the Babylonians over 100 years later to attack and destroy Judah and the capital city of Jerusalem.

The Babylonians were relentless and ruthless, striking Jerusalem three different times over the course of about 19 years, capturing people and taking most of them back to Babylon where they lived as exiles. We could say for them it was “three strikes and you're out.”

- STRIKE #1 (605 BC) – After Jeremiah warned the nation for 23 years the Babylonians busted into Jerusalem and took King Jehoikim away in chains along with sacred objects from the temple. This is when DANIEL and his friends were taken into exile.
- STRIKE #2 (597 BC) – Eight years later, all but the poorest were taken into captivity and all the gold in Jerusalem was sent to Babylon. This is when EZEKIEL was sent into exile.
- STRIKE #3 (586 BC) – Eleven years later, the Babylonians destroyed the city walls of Jerusalem and burned the temple to the ground.

## Where?

Jeremiah is still living among the ruins in Jerusalem after strike #2 when he sends a letter to the Jews now living as exiles under the control of Babylon, which is modern day Iraq.

## Why?

Let's jump off from this question and look at five lessons we can learn.

**1. Submit to God's sovereignty.** The very first thing they needed to know is the same thing we must settle as well. Look at verse 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.”***

- **Recognize who God is.** God refers to Himself with two titles – ***“the Lord of Hosts”*** is translated as ***“God of the Angel Armies”*** or ***“Lord Almighty.”*** He is YAHWEH, the transcendent, mighty and all-powerful God. And He is also ***“the God of Israel,”*** meaning He is in relationship with His special people. He is also ELOHIM, the creator and covenant keeping God. To put both of these names together, God is powerful *and* personal, He is resplendent and relational, He is majestic *and* mine, He is infinite *and* immanent.
- **Respond to what God does.** Notice next from verse 4 that it is God who sent the exiles ***“from Jerusalem to Babylon.”*** This is repeated in verse 7: ***“I have sent you into exile.”*** In verse 1 we read that it was Nebuchadnezzar who took them into exile, but he was simply the instrument God used. I'm sure this made no sense to the people and sometimes what God does doesn't make sense to us either. Listen. Settle this now. He is God and you are not. God's train doesn't run on your track. He does what pleases Him, not what pleases you. He is the potter and we are the clay. His ways are not our ways and we have to be OK with that. I love what Tony Evans says: ***“Everything is either caused by God or allowed by God, and there is no third category.”***

*God will not always do what we desire but He will always do what He decides.*

**2. Bloom where you're planted.** It's easy to lament how bad things are, how pagan our culture is and to retreat from where God has placed us. There was that

temptation when God's people were in Babylon as well as seen in Psalm 137:1-2, 4: ***“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres...How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?”*** But, like they used to say in Israel, *“There's no use crying over spilled milk...and honey.”* God gives them two commands:

- **Settle down.** What God says next is equally surprising in verses 5-6: ***“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. 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.”*** Instead of chafing and complaining about their culture, they were to settle in and settle down and live out Genesis 1:22: ***“Be fruitful and multiply...”***
- **Saturate around.** They were to build their houses but they were also open to their doors. Verse 7 would have startled them: ***“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.”*** The word *“seek”* is active, not passive. They were to influence and impact by seeking the city's success and prosperity as well as peace among the people. They were to live on mission where God had planted them by pressing on, knowing that God had a purpose for His people in the place where He had put them.

Scott Anderson grew up here at Edgewood and went to be with Jesus this past weekend at the age of 32. A number of people got up during the service and gave tributes about him. One of the most moving messages was from a pastor in Chicago who Scott interned with. The first thing Scott did was to move to 79<sup>th</sup> Street so he could be in the ‘heart of the hood.’ Here's what this pastor said: *“He honored his neighbors and submitted himself to the leadership of an African-American pastor. Scott would go where love was most needed.”*

What about you? What about me? *Will we go where love is most needed?* I celebrate how so many of you are living on mission in your neighborhoods! In fact, some of you, like Bryce and Nealie Hill, have moved to a specific community (they now live in west Rock Island) because that's where love is most needed.

Remember, your neighbor is anyone in need that you come across. And your neighbor also lives in your neighborhood and works in your workplace and studies on your campus. God has placed you where you are on purpose, for His purposes. If you want to learn more about how to saturate our society without compromising your convictions, read the Book of Daniel since he also lived in Babylon. I also recommend a very helpful resource on Right Now Media called, “Thriving in Babylon” by Larry Osborn.

This summer we’ve been challenged to follow the BLESS strategy with our neighbors.

**Begin with prayer.**

**Listen.** Take the time to listen to the people around you.

**Eat.** Look for ways to have a meal or dessert with your neighbors.

**Serve.** Observe their needs and then respond accordingly.

**Story.** When the time is right, share the story of how Jesus has changed your life.

**3. Flee false promises.** One of the biggest challenges Jeremiah had was dealing with the “prosperity prophets” who were promising peace and a short stay of only two years in Babylon. Look at verses 8-9: ***“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 send them, declares the LORD.”***

BTW, be careful about prosperity preachers today as well. Prophecies of peace and financial favor don’t necessarily mean that God wants everyone to be healthy and wealthy. Some pastors and authors misuse Jeremiah 29:11 to say that God never wants anything bad to happen in our lives. Simply naming it and claiming it doesn’t make it true. We’ll address how this type of teaching takes the biblical text out of context on the weekend of July 15-16.

Before Jeremiah 29:11, we have Jeremiah 21:10, which I’ve not yet seen imprinted on a coffee mug: ***“For I have set my face against this city for harm and not for good, declares the LORD: it shall be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire.”***

Before moving on from this point, if you don't have a Bible reading plan, pick up a copy at Guest Services because the theme for June is the "Spiritual Mind." We must avoid fake news and fake faith.

*God will not always do what we desire but He will always do what He decides.*

**4. Trust God's Timing.** I like what Erwin Lutzer says: "*When we don't wait on God, we will always wish that we had.*" The next facet of fortifying our faith is to trust God's timing. We can do this because...

- **God will fulfill His promise.** Check out verse 10: "*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.*" Let's just admit that 70 years is a long time, a lifetime actually. One pastor writes, "*No matter how bad it gets, it can only last a lifetime.*" That means many of the exiles will never return, but their children and grandchildren would. We're reminded again of the importance of leaving a legacy for the next generation. I'm looking forward to Edgewood hosting a regional grandparenting conference with Moody Radio in February.

The word for "**completed**" means to be "*satisfied.*" God laid this timeline out on purpose and when it was fulfilled He would "**visit**" His people, which means, "*to search out, to attend*" and return them to their land.

Incidentally, you can count on God's promises. Daniel 9:1-3 says that he read this exact passage in Jeremiah almost 7 decades later and learned that the captivity was about to end: "***I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years.***" Daniel then called for fasting and repentance to prepare the people for their return.

- **God has plans for His people.** And now we come to this terrific text in verse 11 as we're able to see it in context: "***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.***" Interestingly, the word for "**plans**" is also translated as "*thoughts.*" In fact, the Hebrew text of this verse uses "thoughts" or "thinking" three times.

Here are some implications and applications of this verse:

**1. God is thinking about His people all the time.** The word “*you*” is in the second person plural, which means He cares for the people He has called to himself, which would be His church today.

**2. God also cares for people individually.** Isn't it comforting to know that God is thinking about you? I love it when I come home and Beth says, “*I was thinking about you all day.*”

It's mind-blowing that there are over 6 billion people on the planet and yet God has thoughts about you! Psalm 139:17-18: “***How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!***

***How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand.***” In Matthew 10:29-31 Jesus says that not a sparrow hits the ground without God knowing and He cares so much about us that He knows the very number of hairs on our head!

**3. God alone knows what He's doing.** *God will not always do what we desire but He will always do what He decides.* Incidentally, before this time of captivity, God's people were prone to idol worship. This 70-year time of exile seemed to cure them of that!

**4. God desires good for His people.** The word for “*welfare*” is “*shalom*,” which refers to wholeness and peace. God is great and good and gracious and like Joseph declared in Genesis 50:20, He loves to bring good out of that which may look bad: “***As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...***”

**5. Our future is bright.** The Hebrew here literally reads, “*to give you an expected end.*” Philippians 1:6 promises that He will finish what He has begun in our lives. We're not home yet, but we will be soon.

**5. Seek Him Wholeheartedly.** Don't miss the connection between verses 10-11 and verse 12. God's promises and plans should compel us to call out to Him: “***Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.***” We read something similar in Jeremiah 33:3: “***Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.***”

Verse 13 is a good reminder that we can't be passive in our relationship with God: ***"You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart."*** We're called to not be half-hearted but whole-hearted. I'm reminded of what one pastor said in this regard: *"If you're 95% committed to Christ, you're still 5% short!"* Which leads to a question: *Are you seeking Him with all you have?* When you long after the Lord, you'll find what you're looking for in life. Don't put this off because one day it will be too late. Isaiah 55:6: ***"Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near."***

I love the promise found in verse 14: ***"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, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile."*** Don't you love that God will not ultimately abandon His people or abdicate His promises?

We've learned today that *God will not always do what we desire but He will always do what He decides.*

1. Submit to God's sovereignty
2. Bloom where you're planted
3. Flee false promises
4. Trust God's timing
5. Seek Him wholeheartedly

All through the Old Testament we see the thread of redemption as God preserves the line of Judah and the throne of David. The ultimate fulfillment of Jeremiah 29:11 is found in Jesus Christ. In Jeremiah 23:5-6, we read these words: ***"Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'"***

In the midst of all the judgment in the Book of Jeremiah, we also see glimpses of grace. For instance, Jeremiah 31:3 says: ***"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."*** Jeremiah weeps for His people and Jesus does the same when He sees people rejecting His love in Luke 19:41-42: ***"And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying,***

***‘Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.’”***

And in Jeremiah 31:31 we read, ***“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”*** Are you ready for a spiritual goose bump moment? Jesus quotes this passage when He celebrates His last supper with His closest followers in Luke 22:20: ***“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”***

As we participate in communion, let’s remember what the Savior did for us as we seek Him now with our whole hearts.

### **Time of Confession**

1 Corinthians 11:27-29: ***“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.”***

### **Time of Reflection**

1 Corinthians 11:23-26: ***“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”***

### **Distribution of Elements**

### **Transition to “God of the City”**

Communion propels us out into the context of our community. Let’s settle into our cities and saturate the communities where love is most needed as we bloom where He’s planted us.

### **Closing Song: “God of the City”**