

FAITH

IN SEEKING HIM

DATE

April 25 & 26

WEEK

4 of 4

OVERVIEW

Jeremiah 29

KEY VERSE

Jeremiah 29:13

SETTING THE STAGE

Jeremiah served God during the same time period as Daniel. Each had to rely on their faith during extraordinary circumstances that were beyond their control. However, Jeremiah was primarily serving with those who were still in Jerusalem, while Daniel was with those who were taken into exile in Babylon. Each were being used by God to encourage and minister to God's people in a very difficult environment. The last two weeks in the book of Daniel we have seen faith expressed by those living in Babylon. While they were there, Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem writing and ministering on behalf of God to those who had been taken into captivity. (*Daniel 9:2*)

The prophet Jeremiah must be one of the most courageous of all the prophets. Living through one of the darkest times in Israel's history, his enemies did not like his message nor did his family and friends who rejected him. He was beaten, ridiculed, rejected, thrown in a dungeon, tied up; yet, he did not give up. The Lord does not ask us to be successful, He asks us to be faithful to His call and obedient to His Word. Through it all, Jeremiah was faithful. He is known as the "weeping prophet," as he lived his life heartbroken for God's people. It was this compassion that allowed him to move forward in the midst of the sadness of the circumstances that were not going to change anytime soon.

The fact of the matter was that God's people were in exile which would last for 70 years. The reality was that people who were taken from Jerusalem and Judah *Continued on page 24 >*

LESSON OUTLINE

1. Faith found in Exile
2. Faith found in God's Plan
3. Faith in Who He Says He Is

THINGS TO KNOW

- Jeremiah was a contemporary of Daniel and Ezekiel.
- Jeremiah's ministry was primarily in Jerusalem and Judah.
- Jeremiah wrote letters to those living in exile in Babylon.

FAITH

IN SEEKING HIM

Setting the Stage, continued >

may never return based on their age when they left. However, the fullness of God's plan is never limited to the timetable in which we exist on this earth. God's purpose and plan are based on the eternal, not the temporary and finite. Jeremiah recognized that truth and communicated it for the benefit of God's people, encouraging them not to give up, but to hold tightly to their faith as they would keep seeking God.

Despite their disobedience, our Heavenly Father who cares deeply for His people, desired their faith to be restored and provided assurance of His constant faithfulness through Jeremiah.

Introduction

This week as we look at Jeremiah 29, we find the key theme of faith found amid a tragic time in exile. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, we see a prophet who continued to warn the Israelites about breaking their covenant with God. Jeremiah predicted that the empire of Babylon would bring forth judgment, destroying Jerusalem and taking God's people captive into exile; all of which happened.

We pick up where Jeremiah is writing to the captives in Babylon. Letter writing was a way for him to communicate to the Israelites that had been taken away. We know based on the book of Daniel that the letters were received (*Daniel 9:2*). There are several different letters involved in this chapter, two of which we will look at today: a letter from Jeremiah to the exiles (v. 1-14); a letter concerning Jewish false prophets in Babylon (v. 15-23).¹ Jeremiah constantly assures the people, reminding them to remain faithful to the hope of restoration within their own land even in the midst of persecution for their blatant disobedience. Despite their disobedience, our Heavenly Father who cares deeply for His people, desired their faith to be restored and provided assurance of His constant faithfulness through Jeremiah.

Many are familiar with the verse found in 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 a hope and a future.*" (NIV) Out of context, this verse can mislead us to find faith in the promised outcome instead of finding faith in the midst of our current circumstances.

How can we find faith in the midst of our struggles? By seeking Him. The God that came to restore their faith in the middle of a time of exile is the same God that will restore your faith no matter your current circumstance.

We might not be people that are physically living in exile but spiritually speaking we are living in a place that is not our home. The earth was made to be a temporary place of residence for the people of God. The promise for our future is found within the One in whom we put our faith. Let us be reminded that the Lord sees us and just like with the Israelites, He is reminding us to seek Him and take heart; even in the midst of an exile.



¹ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Commentary, OT*, David C. Cook, Colorado, 2007, p.1242.

1. FAITH FOUND IN EXILE

JEREMIAH 29:4-6 *This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those who I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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. (NIV)*

Notice who was responsible for the exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. It was not King Nebuchadnezzar. It was part of God’s plan. These words were both harsh and comforting. The reality is the people of God had repeatedly ignored God and turned their backs on God. God had warned them this would happen. They did not believe that it would actually happen to them; that is the sort of thing that happens to someone else. For those living in exile it must have been overwhelming and heartbreaking; having to leave all that they had ever known. They had a choice to make on what they would do in the midst of their circumstances.

The first part of this chapter establishes the next steps for the people of God. Jeremiah is providing clear direction of what to do in their current situation of exile. They had been given false hope by false prophets that the exile would soon come to an end. The reality was that it was not going to come to an end quickly. That was the harsh reality, but God provides comfort through the words of Jeremiah. The Lord says LIVE in this season, produce in this season and establish your roots until your time is completed. He is encouraging them and us to have faith regardless of our current situation.

Their circumstances were about as bad as one could imagine. They could have given up on living. They could have sunk into a deep depression. They could have embraced a lifestyle of bitterness and anger. But God wanted them to live. Build houses, raise families, live a life of faith in the midst of the exile. Obviously, this would not be an easy task to do on their own.

However, they were not alone. God was a personal God, not a geographical God. Just because they were no longer living their familiar life in their familiar surroundings, they did not have to miss out on a relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. All they had to do was to have enough faith to seek God in the midst of their circumstances.

Let’s continue with verses 7-9:

JEREMIAH 29:7-9 *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.” 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. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD. (NIV)*

It was crucial for them to be reminded to seek peace in a place that was not their home. They were told to pray and go before the Lord on behalf of their enemies. They were asked to bear the weight of the city to which the Lord had brought them. The Gospel was ultimately being brought forth and the Lord was desiring His people to thrive and not lose faith in who He was (and who He still is). Through Babylon’s ultimate downfall, they would see God’s great timing.

Just like Babylon was a foreign place where the Israelites resided, as believers this world is not our home (*Hebrews 13:14*). We are patiently awaiting the Lord’s return, living in a fallen world as foreigners. Our faith is not to be grounded in worldly satisfaction, or in broken promises but in

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what Christ accomplished here on earth for us. Our faith can only be grounded in the One who paid the price for us on the cross for our sins, buried in a tomb (which could be described as an exile) and three days later, resurrected from the grave and offered us the divine opportunity to become citizens of Heaven.

2. FAITH FOUND IN GOD'S PLAN

JEREMIAH 29:10 *This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place." (NIV)*

As we look at this verse it sounds like good news. God is going to fulfill His good promise. God is going to bring you back to this place, your home, to Jerusalem. But wait, it was going to take seventy years to complete? Hold everything.

The Israelites were no longer in Israel, no longer home, no longer near their ordinary and familiar. The weeks would turn into months. The months would turn into years. The years would turn into decades. But it was all part of God's plan. That is the good news and the bad news of this story. It was not part of the plan of those in exile, going through these extraordinary circumstances. Yes, God was going to fulfill His promise. Yes, it was going to take a lifetime.

If we examine this part of the text through the eyes of Jewish culture this plan is hard to hear. Why? During this time period, life expectancy was much shorter due to famine, disease, and war. The average male would not live past fifty years of age. This meant that if he was receiving this news, he most likely would not be able to see the end of their time in exile. But remember that God wanted them to continue to live, get married, have kids, establish families. God had a plan. In fact, part of God's plan was to have Daniel living in Babylon and given positions of authority under all four kings during the 70 years in exile.

With this context in mind, let us look at one of the most famous verses in the Old Testament.

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 a hope and a future. (NIV)*

It is in the difficult, challenging, overwhelming times in life that we find faith in God's plan.

God's people thought they would never end up in Babylon. Then once there, they thought they would never get out of Babylon. This is not unlike how we live our lives. We get caught up in circumstances that we never thought we would have to deal with; divorce, job loss, death of a loved one, illness. Sometimes we spiral downwards to where we feel we can never overcome or move beyond the present set of circumstances. But it is in those difficult, challenging, overwhelming times in life that we find faith in God's plan.

We often forget that God thinks about us. If God has plans for you and me, that means that He thinks about you and me. God takes time to not only think about us but to put together a plan for us. Ultimately God plans to prosper you, though that most likely will not be through financial riches. God does not plan to harm you; He loves you. God thinks about you so much, that He plans to give you a hope and a future.

Remember that His people are in exile in Babylon, a foreign land that they did not choose. But then they are given these words of faith, hope and love. God has a plan for you in whatever circumstance you are in today; God is thinking about you.

Jeremiah continues with the message from God to His people.

JEREMIAH 29:12 *"Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and I 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 I will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." (NIV)*

God wants to have a relationship with you that goes both ways. When we call on God, come to God and pray to God; He will listen. Consider that truth. The God of the Universe. The God who spoke the world into existence. The God who thinks about you will listen to you.

This kind of relationship does not come haphazardly, it only happens with intentionality. Look again at verse 13, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." It takes patience and diligence to seek God, especially in a place of exile. Notice that God puts a small parameter on this promise. We are to seek God with all our heart. It is not about changing the circumstances; it is about building the relationship.

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We have the privilege just like the people who were in exile to patiently wait for God's timing and plan to come to fruition. God's timing is rarely our timing. God's plans are rarely our plans. Yet, God's timing and plan has been and will always be perfect.

DANIEL 7:22 *until the Ancient of Days came and pronounced judgment in favor of the holy people of the Most High, and the time came when they possessed the kingdom. (NIV)*

LUKE 2:6 *While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. (NIV)*

GALATIANS 4:4 *But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the Law. (NIV)*

As we live in this temporary world, in the midst of circumstances that are often out of our control, we need to have faith in God's plan; His eternal plan. We need to have faith in who He says He is. All of time is moving toward a moment in time when every eye will see Christ. Only the Father knows the time; we do not. The Lord wants us to seek Him no matter the circumstance, no matter how long we wait.

3. FAITH IN WHO HE SAYS HE IS

JEREMIAH 29:15-17 *You may say, "The Lord has raised up prophets for us in Babylon," ¹⁶ but this is what the Lord says about the King who sits on David's throne and all the people who remain in the city, your fellow citizens who did not go with you into exile— ¹⁷ yes, this is what the LORD Almighty says: "I will send the sword, famine and plague against them and I will make them like figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten." (NIV)*

While in exile, the people of God looked for quick and convenient answers. They were being misled by false prophets. The Lord wanted to remind the people who was in control and that He was still God who was sovereign over all. Even though they had false hope, the Lord corrected all that had been communicated from the false prophets. Jeremiah gives a foretelling of the destruction that will take place within Jerusalem of the people who remain there. The grass was not necessarily greener back home. God was clearly showing the people that He was still God who remained true to His character. Their faith was being tested.

JEREMIAH 29:19-20 *"For they have not listened to my words," declares the Lord, "words that I sent them again and again by my servants and prophets. And you exiles have not listened either,"*

declares the Lord. ²⁰ Therefore, hear the word of the Lord, all you exiles whom I have sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon.” (NIV)

The Lord called them out. They had not listened to His words. Verse 19 hits close to home for all of us if we are honest with ourselves. We have access to God’s Word like no other time in history. And yet, how often could those words be said of us, “*they have not listened.*” Distraction is easy, listening is not. We live in a world of distractions and excuses. It takes faith to listen to God; faith to realize that He is who He says He is. We might say it with our words, but do we live it in our lives? Do we listen to the truth of the Word of God?

1 JOHN 2:1 says that Christ is our Advocate, “*My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.*” (NIV)

JOHN 6:35 says that Christ is our Bread of Life, *Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* (NIV)

PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11 says that He is Lord of All, *For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* (NIV)

All throughout Scripture the Lord reminds us of His character from beginning to end. These verses do not even scratch the surface of who our God is. Let us learn from those who have gone ahead. Let us remember in Whom to put our faith on a daily basis, regardless of circumstances. We are to have faith while in exile, faith in God’s plan and faith in who He says He is. It is that kind of faith that changes lives and generations.

HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Since the beginning of time, God had a plan. His timing is perfect and purposeful. However, that does not mean that His timing is easy to understand or comfortable to embrace. There are times that circumstances challenge us in ways we do not want to be challenged. We experience things we do not want to experience. Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, *There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven.* Jeremiah realized this truth. Daniel realized this truth. The question is, do we realize this truth?

God wants to teach us, grow us, challenge us, and love us in all circumstances. In the days of Jeremiah, God wanted their faith to be found in Him alone not in temporary security given by false prophets. In their current circumstance of living in captivity, the Lord wanted their faith to take root. Living in constant faith takes time in the mundane, longing, and waiting for the outcome that is only held in our Creator’s hands.

God wants nothing less for us today. God has a plan and a purpose for each one of us. Our challenge is to seek Him with all our heart, call out to Him, knowing He will listen. And then, it becomes our turn to listen to Him, as our faith is enriched.