



Potomac Hills

Presbyterian Church, PCA



By Grace Alone ~ Through Faith Alone ~ In Christ Alone

The Reverend Dr. David V. Silvernail, Jr.
Jeremiah 29:1-32

April 7, 2019
English Standard Version

“The Prophet’s Wise Counsel”

The 24th Sermon in a series on The Book of Jeremiah entitled
“Faithful Living in a Fallen World”

Jeremiah 29:1-32

*“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. ² This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. ³ The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: 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 their 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 your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in My name; I did not send them, declares the LORD.***

*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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will hear 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 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.

¹⁵ “Because you have said, ‘The LORD has raised up prophets for us in Babylon,’ ¹⁶ **thus says the LORD** concerning the king who sits on the throne of David, and concerning all the people who dwell in this city, your kinsmen who did not go out with you into exile: ¹⁷ **‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, behold, I am sending on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like vile figs that are so rotten they cannot be eaten. ¹⁸ I will pursue them with sword, famine, and pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse, a terror, a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them, ¹⁹ because they did not pay attention to My words, declares the LORD, that I persistently sent to you by My servants the prophets, but you would not listen, declares the LORD.’ ²⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, all you exiles whom I sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon: ²¹ **‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab the son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah the son of Maaseiah, who are prophesying a lie to you in My name: Behold, I will deliver them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he shall strike them down before your eyes. ²² Because of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah in Babylon: “The LORD make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire,” ²³ because they have done an outrageous thing in Israel, they have committed adultery with their neighbors’ wives, and they have spoken in My name lying words that I did not command them. I am the One who knows, and I am witness, declares the LORD.’”****

²⁴ To Shemaiah of Nehelam you shall say: ²⁵ **“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: You have sent letters in your name to all the people who are in Jerusalem, and to Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah the priest, and to all the priests, saying, ²⁶ ‘The LORD has made you priest instead of Jehoiada the priest, to have charge in the house of the LORD over every madman who prophesies, to put him in the stocks and neck irons. ²⁷ Now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth who is prophesying to you? ²⁸ For he has sent to us in Babylon, saying, “Your exile will be long; build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat their produce.””**

²⁹ Zephaniah the priest read this letter in the hearing of Jeremiah the prophet. ³⁰ Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ³¹ “Send to all the exiles, saying, **‘Thus says the LORD concerning Shemaiah of Nehelam: Because Shemaiah had prophesied to you when I did not send him, and has made you trust in a lie, ³² therefore thus says the LORD: Behold, I will punish Shemaiah of Nehelam and his descendants. He shall not have anyone living among this people, and he shall not see the good that I will do to My people, declares the LORD, for he has spoken rebellion against the LORD.’”**

Heavenly Father, this is Your Word and we need it. The lament in these words we too easily identify with, the resolve in these words we long to have, but the pain, the suffering, the fear of exile, chills us to the bone. We’re afraid of our own hearts to really understand and believe these words. Yet in this too there is a vital message for the people of God, so grant us the courage to look it square in the eye and to sit under Your Word, not judging it but being judged by it, being built up by it, and even being comforted by it. Help us to hear it, understand it,

believe it, and obey it. And so we pray, speak through Your Word this morning, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, help us see Jesus, in His name we pray, amen.

INTRODUCTION: *God Loves You and Has A Horrible Plan For Your Life.*

We have heard it said that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. It's easy to agree when we like the plan. But what do you do when the plan isn't what you expected? What do you do when it seems like **God loves you** and has a horrible plan for your life? What then?

- The doctor calls with bad news, "I'm sorry. It's cancer. There's nothing we can do."
- Your wife tells you she wants a divorce after 20 years of marriage.
- Your boss calls you in and says, "We've decided to let you go."
- Your daughter moves out after an argument ... and moves in with her boyfriend.
- Your best friend decides she doesn't need you in her life anymore, and suddenly she won't return calls, texts, or emails.
- Your job search has led to a dead end and now you're out of money and out of leads.
- You forgot about the changes in the tax laws and now you owe the IRS \$15,000.
- You prayed for your son to come back to the Lord, but instead he seems to have hardened his heart.
- Your husband was diagnosed with dementia.
- The college of your dreams turned you down.
... And you didn't make the team.
... And that girl, yeah, that one ... doesn't even know you're alive.
... And you cry out, "**Lord, what's going on?**"

We're all familiar with the notion that God doesn't always answer our prayers the way we'd like. Pray for any length of time and sooner or later ... probably sooner ... you'll come up against the hard reality of a sincere prayer that doesn't seem to get answered ... **at all**. I've often thought about the "*unspoken requests*" that people mention when the time comes to pray at Community Group. After all the usual requests are recorded, someone tentatively raises her hand to say, "*I have an unspoken request.*" What falls into that category? An unspoken request is usually something **so close to the heart that you cannot mention it without tears**. It's a request that arrives at **that painful intersection of biblical faith** and the harsh reality that we live **in a fallen world**.

What do we do when God doesn't come through? How do we hold on to hope when life itself seems to take a wrong turn down a dead-end street? What if all we hold dear is suddenly snatched away, if all the familiar landmarks are removed, if all our friends desert us, if our job is gone, our health disappears, and death comes unbidden to our door. **These things happen**. What then?

Well ... then we're forced to face a difficult but undeniable reality. **Sometimes God's plan is DIFFERENT from what we expected**. What then?

Well, Jeremiah tells us. And he starts by encouraging us to ...
v. 1-9: SEEK AFTER GOOD¹

¹ **The Exposition of the text is adapted from the books, Preaching the Word – Jeremiah and Lamentations: From Sorrow to Hope by Dr. Philip Graham Ryken, pages 406-427; Run with the Horses by Dr. Eugene Peterson, pages 145-156; True Words for Tough Times by Dr. Dale Ralph Davis, pages**

*“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. ² This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. ³ The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: 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 their 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 your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in My name; I did not send them, declares the LORD.”*

It finally happened. For decades Jeremiah had prophesied judgment upon God’s people. Over and over he said God would punish them with sword, famine, and captivity. He turned out to be right. In the year 597 B.C. the Babylonians came down and attacked Jerusalem, killing many and carrying most of the rest into captivity. King Nebuchadnezzar carried off the best and brightest of Judah to **Babylon**. And things got even worse once they arrived in **Babylon**.

The chapter begins, **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.”* The reference to *“surviving elders”* shows how badly things had gone. The survivors were the lucky ones, so to speak, **verse 2**, *“This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem.”* The Babylonians had done terrible things to the Jews. They had destroyed their city, ransacked their temple, ruined their economy, removed their leaders, and enslaved their people. **Babylon** had done its worst to Jerusalem.

It is not surprising, then, that Saint Augustine viewed **Babylon** as a symbol of **evil**. In his classic work, **The City of God**, the great North African theologian described human history as a conflict between two great cities — the city of God and the city of Man. Augustine later identified **Babylon** as the Biblical symbol of the city of Man. James Montgomery Boice’s book **Two Cities, Two Loves** applies Augustine’s insights to the post-Christian world, where he writes, “According to St. Augustine, who gave us the distinction between *“The Two Cities”* ... Scripture unfolds the history of two distinct groups of people, each having a distinct origin,

54-59. **And the Sermons**, “The Meaning of the City” by Dr. Timothy Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, 10/5/03, [The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive](#), Logos Bible Software 8.3 and “God Has A Bigger Plan” by Dr. Ray Pritchard, former Pastor of Calvary Memorial Church, Oak Park, IL, 4/8/08, www.keeppbelieving.com. **And the article**, “Am I My City’s Keeper?” by Dr. Ed Stetzer, Billy Graham Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism at [Wheaton College](#), Wheaton, IL, 2/15/16, *Christianity Today*, www.ChristianityToday.com. Two of the best books on understanding The City of God and The City of Man are **The City of God** by Augustine (find a modern language abridgement) and **Two Cities, Two Loves: Christian Responsibility in a Crumbling Culture** by Dr. James Montgomery Boice.

development, characteristics and destiny. These are two cities or societies. The earthly society has as its highest expression the city cultures of **Babylon** and ... Rome. The other is the church, composed of God's elect. The former is destined to pass away. The latter is blessed by God and is to last forever." To read **Jeremiah 29** with the two cities in mind is to recognize that God's people were prisoners in the city of Satan. They were refugees in **Babylon**, which represents everything hateful and revolting to God.

So what should God's people do when their new zip code puts them in Satan's precinct? When God's people were captives in **Babylon**, they probably thought God would tell them to run away. Or revolt. What He did instead was tell them **to make themselves at home**. The gist of Jeremiah's prophecy was that God was going to build **His city** in the middle of Satan's city. Jeremiah was still living back in Jerusalem, perhaps because the Babylonians did not consider him important enough to deport. Thus he needed to send this letter to the **exiles in Babylon**, starting at **verse 3**, "*The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. It said: 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 their 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.*"

One senses God's passion for His people. Yet He's talking about the city of **Babylon**, of all places. His surprising plan for the redemption of His exiled people meant building **the City of God** smack-dab in the middle of the City of Man. No doubt when the captives discussed their exile in **Babylon** they used words like "*abandoned*" or "*banished*" or "*condemned*" to describe what God had done to them. But that's not how God saw things. He viewed the Exile as a **mission**. He said, **verse 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.*" Nebuchadnezzar did not **take** them to **Babylon**. **God sent** them there. The **exiles** were not captives as much as they were missionaries.

All this leads us back to Jeremiah's original prophecy — that God's people would go into exile for **seventy years**. It's a **devastating** word. Most of the people **won't survive** that long and the rest will have to **endure slavery** in a foreign land, **displaced** from their homes, **for the rest of their lives**. Even the "*faithful ones*" among God's people will go into **exile**. Jeremiah is so moved by the thought of **this terrible reality** that he decides to write to those who will survive the initial trip into exile. He has a word from the Lord, who wants to prepare them and their descendants for the next **seventy years in Babylon**. Though it will **never** be their true home, and they will be forced into **slavery**, nevertheless the Lord tells them to settle in and make the best of a bad situation. Essentially, He says, "I want you to do something — **I want you to seek the welfare of the city in which you now dwell.**" "*Babylon? Our enemies? Our captors? The most ungodly people we know?*" "Yes, seek their welfare. That's how you're going to sing the Lord's song in a strange land — seek their welfare, for in **their** welfare you will find **your** welfare."

So, what does it mean to "*seek their welfare*"? What does that even look like? How do we do that? Well, I've titled this section, "*seek after good*," because I think that's what it looks like. Seeking the welfare of the city is taking action to make the community better, both by

being **good** citizens (as they were supposed to be) and by making the city a **good** place to live (which they appeared to be doing). We don't have an amazing amount of context here, but the idea seems to be that if God's people are addressing other people's **needs** because of their presence and their actions, helping to move the residents towards a better life, the city's inhabitants will see the hand of God at work through His people. God's people shouldn't be satisfied with just personal blessing but desire the blessing of a loving God to be spread throughout their community.

After all, Jesus cared for His city ... and our mission is to join Jesus on His mission. In **John 20:21** we read, "*Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you."* We are sent as He was sent. So what does that mean for us? Did Jesus seek the welfare of His city? And if so, how? Well, Jesus begins his public ministry by saying, **Luke 4:18-19, 21**, "*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 recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,* ¹⁹ *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" Then He rolls up the scroll and says, "²¹ *Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

Jesus spent a lot of time serving hurting people — there's no question about that. Part of that service was demonstrating **His power** over the brokenness of His culture. He did this by working miracles. But I also think part of it was to demonstrate **His character**: His purpose as the Messiah was to deliver us from the bonds of sin. If we join Jesus on His mission, I think that will involve serving those who are hurting. In fact, I think the world is often confused when they see a church that claims to follow Jesus but is not actually doing much of what Jesus did. They know **He** healed the sick and ministered to hurting people, and they wonder why a church would be unengaged in these areas.

Luke wrote in **Acts 10:38b** that, "*He went about **doing good** and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.*" There was eternal **context** for **the good** Jesus did. You see, Jesus didn't just come to fix brokenness in the world. His mission wasn't just to make it a better place to live. He actually came to **make dead people live**. In **Luke 19:10** Jesus says, "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save **the lost**.*" So yes, Jesus came **serving**. But He also came **saving**. The Bible teaches us that people are not only hurting, but they're dead in their trespasses and sins. When we talk about seeking the welfare of the city, we must remember the people in the city are dead in their trespasses and sins. If we're going to serve our city, our county, our town, we need to join Jesus in His mission of serving **and** saving.

The idea of serving in our community is not a new one. The greatest growth of the ancient church came in the late second and early third centuries when plagues swept through the Empire. In his book **Cities of God** Rodney Stark demonstrates, through some impressive historical analysis, how Christianity became an urban religion, conquering Rome in the process. When plague came, the pagans of Rome fled from the afflicted. They burned the bridges into their towns. Christians, however, remained behind caring for the sick and burying the dead. In seeing the care the believers showed for their communities, as they served the hurting, people were open to hear the good news of the gospel of the One who saves completely. Service that leads to saving — that was the pattern of Christ. We can learn from — and even emulate — that pattern.

Seeking after good was no more popular in Jeremiah's time than it is in our time. Because the false prophets were saying this would all be short-lived, that the exile would only last a few years, the people never settled down. The **exiles** thought their exile would end any minute, so they still had their bags packed to go back to Jerusalem. They were working part-time jobs. They were renting rather than buying. They were not committed to the city. They weren't trying to either serve or save, they were simply trying to survive.

It all goes back to whether you are willing to **believe** what God said in **Jeremiah 29**. If you're a Jew in exile, it's not easy to hear that you'll be **in Babylon for seventy years** because that means you'll probably die there. On the other hand, God is promising to bring His children home at last. **So it is for all of us**. There is no break from the pain and suffering of this world. Think of it this way. If you were a Jew in exile, in one sense it didn't matter whether you believed God or not. **You're still in Babylon either way**. But on a daily basis, either **you live with hope or you don't**. And you pass along that hope **to your children and your grandchildren or you don't**. **And that matters!**

Where does all this leave us? The answer is, we're all still hurting. We're still a death-sentence generation living in a sin-cursed world. We all hurt ... most of us every day. No one is immune from suffering. All the sons and daughters of Adam live in the wreckage of that bus Adam drove off the cliff. We live with pain and sadness ... most of us every day. There is no escape from that reality.

When we hurt, we have two choices: We can hurt **with God**, or we can hurt **without God**. Perhaps that's why the next thing Jeremiah tells us is to ...

v. 10-14: SEEK AFTER GOD ²

"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. ¹¹ 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. ¹² Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will hear 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 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."

When judgment finally arrived, something remarkable happened. Jeremiah changed his tune. The next several chapters are filled with some of the most wonderful promises in all of Scripture. After 28 chapters of gloom and doom, Jeremiah came bearing good news of grace and glory. He promised that God would bring His people back from captivity (30:3). He would love them *"with an everlasting love"* (31:3) and *"turn their mourning into gladness"* (31:13). He would make a new covenant with them (31:31) and give them *"singleness of heart and action"* (32:39). God would even *"cleanse them from all the sin they have committed"* (33:8). Jeremiah summarized all these blessings in one wonderful promise, **verse 11**, *"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."* The promise meant that God knew what he was doing. He had known it all along

² Part of this section is adapted from my sermon, *"Plans for Prosperity,"* preached here at Potomac Hills on 1/22/17 as part of the series on "The Most Misused and Misunderstood Verses of the Bible"

... as He always does. God makes His plan and He carries it out. Everything He does is for the ultimate good of His people.

Remember, most people think that these verses work great for my personal dreams of having a smooth, prosperous, and materially blessed life. And as I was writing this yesterday, a package came to the office that had **this verse** printed on the box. But it was for Dave Dorst, so apparently, he'll have a smooth, prosperous, and materially blessed life, the rest of you, not so much.

It's easy for people to feel, that at the very least, God is **obligated** to make my immediate future into a thing of beauty. And they use this verse as a means to envision a great job after college, a comfortable lifestyle, good health, a nice home "where all the women are strong, the men are good-looking, and the children are above average" ... in other words, a future defined **on my terms**.

It's remarkable how often people have **no problem manipulating the text** to suit our own preconceived notions of "**blessing**" while at the same time handing God **my timetable** for these things to be done. But in doing this, **we violate the context** and completely miss the fact that God was talking to **a nation (not an individual)**, **a nation** that had to go through **seventy years** of heartache and exile before there was any hope of freedom from captivity. And if it **couldn't** be used as a promise for **the immediate future** of those who first heard it, then it **shouldn't** be used as a promise for **our immediate future** either.

Remember, when it comes to Bible interpretation, "**Context is King**." And especially when we're reading the prophets, it's necessary to determine as much as possible, **who specifically** is being addressed by any given text, and **what specifically** is the situation that's being addressed. And with this **context**, there are a few things we should notice right away. **First**, God is speaking to the **nation** of Judah, and they've just been sent off **into exile**. This is **His plan for that nation, and for those people**, not necessarily **a personal promise** that's directed to any one person at any other time in history. It's a "**corporate**" promise. Therefore, we should be cautious about taking it **out of context** and inappropriately applying it to **individual believers** in the 21st Century. God is talking about His literal plans to restore **His people (plural)**, prosper **His people (plural)**, and bring **His people (plural)** back from captivity!

We're conditioned by modern Western society to think primarily in terms of **the individual**, of our own personal needs and interests. And this type of thinking **permeates** the church as well. Thus, we tend to assume that everything the Bible affirms, or promises, is directed **to us as individual believers**. But both the Old Testament and the New Testament are primarily directed to **God's people as a whole** (whether Israel or the church). Therefore, when we appropriate **corporate** statements to ourselves as **individuals**, **we need to justify it**. In many texts, particularly in the Old Testament, we're on firmer ground if we keep our focus on God's character and His dealings with Israel. Then this passage, and other passages like it, should encourage us that **our trust is in the same God** who reassured the **exiles in Babylon** so many centuries ago.

Second, this is a promise for God's people ... **who will exist seventy years from now**. **Seventy years** from the time the promise is given. The vast majority of people who hear this promise from Jeremiah's lips ... **will never see it fulfilled in their lifetime**. They will likely **perish in exile** before this promise is ever fulfilled. Therefore, the current **exiles** should shed

any expectation of looking for a short-term **I-deserve-the-best-life-now** kind of blessing from this. They were about to endure **seventy years** of pain and heartache from this captivity.

All this means the prophecy of prosperity and hope was directed toward **a future people** — those who would be born in exile and emerge from that place much later, the children and grandchildren of the present-day **exiles**. Think about it, if this promise was given to us **TODAY**, for a future blessing **seventy years** from now, who would benefit from it? **Not me!** I don't expect to be around in **seventy years**. My **children** probably won't be around in **seventy years**. So, this promise would be for my grandchildren, the oldest of whom would be 84 at the time, and their children, and their grandchildren — **my great-great-grandchildren**.

So what is text telling us to do? Quite simply, we are, no matter how difficult the circumstances, **to seek after God**. Why? Corrie Ten Boom, author of *The Hiding Place*, once said, “*Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.*” God makes and God knows God's plan. This fact is stressed by the grammar of **verse 11**, where in Hebrew, the “**I**” is repeated for emphasis, “*For I, I know the plans I have for you.*” We don't know what the plans are, but God does. These are God's plans for us, not our plans for God, or even our plans for us. God insists on His right to know and fulfill His plans, which is why the plans are so good. They are God's plans rather than ours.

The God who knows the plans also carries them out. In the verses that follow, Jeremiah lists all the things God will do. “*I will hear you ... I will be found by you ... I will restore your fortunes ... I will gather you ... I will bring you back.*” God will do the finding, the gathering, and the bringing back. Since God made the plans and knows the plans, it makes sense for Him to fulfill the plans as well. And if God's plans are for the future, the Christian shouldn't complain about the present. One of the dangers of grumbling about what God's doing is that, whatever it is, God's probably not finished doing it. By its very nature, a plan is something that won't be completed until sometime in the future. And once it's completed, it won't be a plan anymore; it will be history. If God has plans for hope and a future, you must give Him time to work them out.

That's why the Christian lives **by faith**. A Christian is someone who **trusts** the promises of God for the future and acts upon them in the present. In other words, the Christian acts on God's promises **before** they're fulfilled, as **Hebrews 11:1** says, “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” To draw comfort from God's plans for the future, one must take them **by faith**. The **exiles in Babylon** had to live **by faith**. During the **seventy years** of their captivity, they had to **trust** the promises of God. They had to live for God in the city **by faith**. They had to build houses, plant gardens, raise families, and pray for the welfare of the city **by faith**. Things looked promising, but only as long as they **trusted God** to do what He said He would do.

So, we're to seek after good and seek after God, but the last half of the chapter turns dark again. It lists all the problems, all the sins, all the ways the people failed to seek after good and seek after God. But these hard and harsh verses not only show us ungodliness, they encourage us to instead ...

v. 15-32: SEEK AFTER GODLINESS ³

³ Part of this section comes from the articles, “*Three Biblical Frameworks for Faithfulness in the Post-Christendom West (Parts 1 & 2)*” 12/7-8/17, and “*Our Call: Missionaries in a Secular Land*” 5/1/18, all by

I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this section since it covers much of the same ground as several previous chapters. I think it's here **by way of contrast**. It highlights several problems with those in exile, and with those who stayed back in Jerusalem. And all the problems seem to revolve around false prophets, and all the ways the people of Israel, both those in exile in **Babylon**, and those who remained behind in Jerusalem, seemed to struggle with **trusting God**. And they struggled with **trusting God** because everything looked so bleak. The **exiles** were strangers in a strange land. Those in Jerusalem were in a city left in ruins. Both groups were overwhelmed. As far as they could see, everything was in **turmoil**.

And there are many Christians today who feel much the same way. We live in a moment of **cultural turmoil** in the West, particularly in the United States. The shift to a post-Christendom age means that we as Christians need to rediscover our identity as the people of God in a place that is increasingly **foreign** and, at times, **hostile**. This is different from the culture most of us grew up in, and it's one many of us didn't expect to have risen so quickly. The result is a disorienting feeling — a sense that things have changed so rapidly that there's a temptation to **fear** that this is only the beginning. However, we need to consider that this decline in **cultural Christianity** can be, in part, a blessing for the church — an opportunity for us to distinguish **nominal faith** from authentic belief.

The exodus of **nominal faith** or **cultural Christianity** has similar potential to leave convictional Christians with a sense of **increased isolation**. Where we were once awash in an ocean of sympathetic people who claimed our identity and belief system as their own, we now operate in a world where lines between Christian and non-Christian are much more stark. It's into this fear that Jesus both comforts us and calls us to action, back to **John 20:21**, "*Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you."*" Jesus' sending of us is modeled on His own sending by the Father. Notice that Jesus establishes two truths in this call that are crucial to our identity. **First**, he proclaims **His peace** in the midst of the storm. When we're tempted to fear, we must remember that the resurrected Christ is there in all His power and glory. **Second**, He commissions us to proclaim **His gospel**. We're sent with the **same message**: the proclamation of forgiveness and reconciliation.

In an age where Christians are concerned over cultural change, we need to rediscover our call to mission and our identity as the people of God. In order to think through this call, an important step for the church is to reevaluate our context. Displaced from cultural dominance, the church needs to embrace its historic identity as **spiritual exiles** — citizens of heaven who for a time are **strangers in a hostile world**. This has **always** been our identity but, at times, the church needs to be reminded of it.

Scripture consistently reminds us that believers are not to be at home in this world. This message is front and center in **1 Peter**, where the apostle sets the tone early by greeting "*God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces.*" Speaking to a church undergoing persecution and suffering, the Apostle Peter reminds them that they're **the people of God** — whether Jew or Gentile they're **chosen** as God's holy ones. Peter reminds his readers that this hostility and danger arises from the fact that they're **exiles in a foreign land**, awaiting the deliverance of the King. Yet, rather than telling them to fight their culture, Peter tells believers that to live as **exiles**

and foreigners means to live in fear of God and as lights within the darkness, **1 Peter 1:17**, “*And if you call on Him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear **throughout the time of your exile.***”

This **exilic** language is crucial today as Christians recognize that we’re losing our cultural dominance. Similar to the **exiles in 1 Peter and Jeremiah**, we are to see ourselves as **exiles in another land**. This isn’t something to be feared, yet it does mean that we need to think critically about the way we engage culture, proclaim the gospel, and advocate for justice and holiness in the political sphere.

Going back to **Jeremiah 29**, notice that in addition to praying for their neighbors and city, God calls them to build houses, plant gardens, marry, and have children. In other words: **This is not the end. Continue to live faithfully in a fallen land.** As Christians in an **exilic context**, we need to pick up this mantle. We need to faithfully minister in a hostile community. We need to pray for and seek the welfare of our neighbors, our cities, and our nation. We need to learn from our Christian brothers and sisters who have been prophetic voices for the gospel along the margins for centuries. This world is not our home, but it is our mission field and, even in a foreign land, the fields are no less ripe for harvest.

A major part of my job is to remind believers, to remind you, that in the midst of the time and culture that we live, **the commission of God endures**. He is calling for those who will go into their neighborhoods to bring the forgiving and reconciling message of Jesus. He wants us to join Him in building the City of God right in the very center of the City of Man. You live where you live so you can plant the cross in the heart of pagan territory, claiming it for Christ.

Centuries after Jeremiah, Jesus Christ, at the end of his life, comes in not to **Babylon**, but to Jerusalem. So here comes Jesus Christ into **the city of God**. What happens to Him there? He’s executed and thrown out. You never executed somebody inside the city. You executed them on a hill outside. He went to Calvary. He went outside. Why did you execute criminals outside? It was symbolic of the **exile** that sin deserves. The consequence of selfishness and sin is **exile**. You lose the safety, you lose the community, and you’re thrown out.

Jesus Christ went into **the city of God**, and He was killed and thrown out. But it wasn’t just a symbol with Jesus. **It was a reality**. **Hebrews 13:12-14**, “*So Jesus also suffered **outside the gate** in order to sanctify the people through His own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to Him outside the camp and bear the reproach He endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.*” Jesus suffered outside the gate. What does that mean? On the cross, Jesus was forsaken. Jesus was cosmically thrown out. God forsook him. He lost the Father. He experienced hell, as it were, on the cross. I’ll put it this way. Jesus Christ **was thrown out of the city of God so you and I could be brought in**. Why? He got the punishment. He got the banishment. He got **the exile**. Sin deserves to be thrown out of the city, but Jesus Christ took it for us.

So when you believe in Jesus, you’re automatically enrolled in the city of God. You become a citizen of the city of God. Listen carefully.

Jesus lost **the city that was** ...

... so we could become citizens of **the city that is to come**,

... and that makes us salt and light **in the city that is**.

Why? If you know who you are, if your identity is in Christ, if you have the love of God, then you move out into the earthly city not for yourself, but in order to serve and save your

neighbor. **Jeremiah 29** speaks to those, who like us, are in **exile**. Sure, plant gardens and grow, and flourish, and multiply.

But always remember ... **You're In Babylon!**

This makes all the difference. Why? Because only then will we have **exile** thinking and gospel focus. We begin to think about our mission to engage a culture that God loves and wants to redeem and restore to Himself. Jesus wants us to join Him in building the City of God right in the very center of the City of Man. You live where you live so you can plant the cross in the heart of pagan territory, claiming it for Christ. Think about that. You need to pray.

Take a moment to do that, and then I'll close.

*Our Lord and our God, thank You that You have spoken to us by Your Son. Open our eyes that we might see our sin and then see our Savior. Oh Lord, the story wrapped around this chapter demonstrates there's simply no other god as merciful, gracious, and engaged as You. Your patience is immeasurable; your kindness is inexhaustible; your plans are for our welfare. When Your people received this letter from Jeremiah, they were in exile in **Babylon**. How could they not feel bewildered and betrayed by You? Yet, when You lead us into difficult seasons, it's not to punish us but to prosper us. When you send hardships, it's not to bring us harm but to give us hope. When you discipline us, it's not just to show us Your displeasure, but to free us from the consequences of our foolishness – and to guarantee our good future.*

You're not a God who reacts out of irritation, but One who always acts out of great affection. You know the plans you have for us, individually and corporately. There's no happenstance in heaven; no randomness in redemption; no coincidence, just providence. You don't make it up as You go along. You never engage in "trial and error." "Stuff" doesn't just happen, sovereignty is always happening. Father, this way of thinking would be utter madness if you never sent Jesus. But Jesus is the "Yes" to every promise you have made. His life, death and resurrection are the guarantee of the gospel, our living hope, and our glorious future. Apart from Jesus there is only hopelessness unimaginable. Because of Jesus there is joy unspeakable. So, bring the truth, grace, and power of this gospel into our current situations; into our personal stories of pain; into the brokenness of our church; and into the needs of our community. Comfort us that we might comfort others. Bless us, that we might bless others. Mercy us, that we might mercy others. Restore our hearts. For all who come today bearing pain, I ask, O Lord, that You minister to them. For all who come today needing resolve, I ask that You minister to them. For all who wonder if there is or ever will be justice in this world, show them Jesus. So very Amen I pray, in the name of Your Son, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

This message has been lightly edited and formatted for the web page. No attempt has been made to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template. There may be slight differences with the audio version. Should there be any questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any error to be with the original speaker and should contact him directly. For full copyright, reproduction and permissions information, please visit the PHPC Copyright statement at www.PotomacHills.org.

Hebrews 11:14-16

“For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared for them a city.”