

God's Way is Better

May 28, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Jeremiah 29:1-14

Session Outline

1. Unmet Expectations (Jeremiah 29:1-4)
2. How to Live in the Now (Jeremiah 29:5-9)
3. God's Promise and Plan (Jeremiah 29:10-14)

Theological Theme

The Jewish people expected to live in or around Jerusalem as God's chosen people but because of their own rebellious choices, many were taken into captivity in Babylon. Jeremiah wrote to them from Jerusalem and encouraged them that God had a plan even in their captivity and God's plans are always best.



Leader Guide

God's Way is Better

Introduction

Have you ever set a destination on your GPS but then tried to go a different way than directed you? Maybe you didn't trust the electronic map or maybe you had an idea of where the destination was that differed from your GPS even though you let it continue to give instructions. If you listen to voice commands, then you will hear the GPS telling you insistently to take the next left or turn in two hundred feet. If you choose a different turn or direction than the GPS, you will receive a "rerouting" notice.

Much of our lives can be like this. We set a destination, thinking we know at least vaguely where we are headed. Yet often we get rerouted. Today we are talking about a situation where God's people were pretty sure what should happen, but things were not playing out the way they expected. The big difference between their situation and your GPS is that God's plans are always for our best and we can absolutely trust whatever instructions He gives.

- ❓ When have you had a GPS incident that challenged your expectations of the right route?
- ❓ How does it make you feel to see the "rerouting" message?
- ❓ When was a time you were thankful you trusted the GPS?

Session Summary


Most people have ideas and expectations of how their lives will play out. Inevitably, things happen that change the trajectory and people find themselves where they never thought they would be. Whether those changes occur because of their own choices or as consequences from another's actions, the result is the same. God's people knew all about this because they were in captivity and far from Jerusalem when Jeremiah wrote a letter of encouragement to them.

In his letter, Jeremiah encouraged the people to keep going. He instructed them on how they should be living while in captivity and extended the hope they needed by reminding them that although they felt off track, they were still God's people and could still trust Him. Jeremiah firmly stated that God's plans were for their good and they could trust what they knew to be true about the Lord.


1. Unmet Expectations (Jeremiah 29:1-4)

These first few verses of chapter 29 set the stage for what was happening with the Jewish people. It is important to know the context and background of those who were being addressed. Jeremiah was God's prophet to the people at this time in history around 600 BC.

There had been two invasions of Jerusalem that resulted in captives being taken away but also left a sizable population of Jews in Jerusalem and Judah who would soon be taken. Nebuchadnezzar was the king behind the invasions. The Jews received the letter while in exile in Babylon, a nation completely foreign to the way they had lived and that opposed their religious beliefs and practices.

-  What does the context of this situation tell you about what the people might have hoped for or expected for themselves and from God?

Although the message was directed to the Jewish leaders in exile, it applied to the entire Jewish community there. Consider how those people felt, remembering that they were God's people and were destined to live in Jerusalem enjoying God's favor, but that was not their reality. Any time God's people find themselves in an unexpected or unwanted place, they can be tempted to blame God or whine and complain to Him about the situation.

-  When have you found yourself in an unexpected place? How was this a result of your ignoring/rebelling against God's GPS?

Jeremiah started his message with a declaration about who inspired the letter. Though they were used to prophets speaking aloud the word from the Lord, in this case it was written and delivered by hand. Jeremiah wanted to be sure they understood that the information was from God and deserved the same attention as if it was spoken aloud. It was a valid and true expression of Jeremiah's prophetic office regardless of the means of communication.

When facing a new reality that we didn't seek or want, we often have confusion and questions. Think about how you feel when you are outside of your own comfort zone. You may wonder how you are supposed to act or deal with the different things that you're confronted with. That was likely the same for these people. They were now exiles instead of favored children of God. They were forced to live in a land they had no desire to be in. They were surrounded by ungodly influences that were the opposite of their religious faith and upbringing.



Application: How do you relate to the situation of the Jewish people in exile? When have you found yourself in an undesirable place experiencing confusion and concern?

2. How to Live in the Now (Jeremiah 29:5-9)

God knew His people had questions and struggled with their new reality in Babylon, so He gave Jeremiah instructions about how they should live. They were in the place that God dictated due to Judah's rebellion. Notice back in verse 4, God said He was the one who led them to this place. After generations of ignoring God and living as they chose, it was time to face the consequences. According to God's plan, they would be in Babylon for quite a while, so He instructed them to settle in and make the best of their time there.

Exile did not mean God had forgotten them even though they might have felt He had. The same is true about circumstances we face today. Even when it feels like you've been forgotten or overlooked, the truth for you is the same as the truth for the Israelites in Babylon: God wants you to flourish and thrive in whatever situation you are in. The Lord wanted them to multiply in Babylon just as they did in Egypt.



When have you felt forgotten or overlooked by God? How have you been reminded of His care for you in difficult circumstances?


God instructed them to seek the welfare of the city for however long they lived there. Instead of waiting and marking time until they could return to Jerusalem, they were to seek out ways they could be a blessing to the community around them. Jeremiah wrote that their own welfare was tied to the welfare of the city, and they needed to pray for God's blessings on Babylon. When you are in an unexpected place, one of the best things you can do is pray and ask God to show you how to be a godly influence there.



Why should you look for ways to be a blessing even in places you don't want to be?


Jeremiah also warned the people against believing everything they heard. They were to be on guard against false teachers and false prophets. These false prophets were telling the people things that did not line up with God's will and plan. The Jews were being told that their exile was going to be short lived, and they would soon be returning home. If they believed this untruth, it would affect the way they lived out their days in Babylon and they would miss out on the opportunities around them to do God's will.

The Lord made it clear that only His prophets spoke in His name. He told them directly that the false prophets were telling lies in His name even though they were not sent by Him. This is still a danger in today's world. There are people who preach and speak what they claim to be from God but is not. These untruths often include hints of truth and are often connected to Scripture but are twisted to fit someone else's narrative or agenda. We must be like the Jews in Babylon and resist believing and following these lies.


 Application: How can you apply what God said to the Jews in Babylon to your own life?

3. God's Promise and Plan (Jeremiah 29:10-14)

The exile in Babylon was part of God's plan and He already had an end in mind. Although it may not have been exactly what they wanted to hear, Jeremiah told the people their captivity would not last longer than seventy years. Imagine how that news landed on its hearers: It could be comforting to know that there was an end to this season appointed already, but it might be also disheartening to think about how long seventy years can feel.

 How do you think the people felt in getting the news of the seventy-year timeline? How would you have felt?

But God promised them He would visit them and fulfill His previous promise to bring them home. One thing we can stand firm on is God always has good plans for us. Even when we mess up and must face consequences for a time, God still has His own plans for our lives. Verse 11 is one of the most quoted verses for people who are in transition or making decisions about the future. Though you may have heard it before, consider how you might understand it differently now that you know the backstory of what was happening when Jeremiah wrote those words.

 How have you heard Jeremiah 29:11 referenced in the past? How does knowing the context surrounding this verse change the way you understand it?

Babylon

The duration of the Babylonian kingdom is linked with the length of the exile. From Nebuchadnezzar's accession to the throne in 605 BC to the fall of Babylon in 539 BC was sixty-six years.

God made clear how He thought and felt about the exiled Jews in Babylon. They may not have been certain, or they may have doubted if they were even on God's radar. But God stated His posture toward them clearly so that they could be certain and stand firm on His promises when times were tough. While we may not hear directly from God in the same way this group did, God's promises to us are stated clearly throughout Scripture.

Because God's people were in exile as judgement for their rebellion, it could be easy to believe God's thoughts were not positive toward them. But God assured them that His thoughts were of peace and that He had in mind for them future hope. Never allow the devil to steal the hope of a good future from you based on temporary circumstances or situations. Anytime you are tempted to believe God is out to get you or has evil intentions toward you, this verse can be a reminder that God's thoughts and plans for you are of peace and a future hope. Nothing can take that away, even your own sinful choices.

The Lord also promised the people He would hear their prayers and listen to them even though they were away from their tabernacles and religious temple rituals. Imagine how comforting this was to the exiles. Not only did God comfort them with good plans for the future, but He also invited them to connect with Him personally. They did not have to suffer in darkness and silence but could seek after God, pray to Him, and find Him. This is the key to a positive future for all of us.



Application: How can you apply what you learned from this passage and the promises of God about your current situation? Your future?

Conclusion

Although Christ followers today have not been taken captive in a foreign land, there is still much to correlate between with the Jews in exile and our living in America today. We are surrounded by a culture that is aggressively antagonistic toward things of the Lord. We hear false messages and teachings that try to draw us away from truth and threaten to distract us from the will of God. If we are not careful, we can find ourselves far from God and feeling like the Jews in Babylon.

Instead of giving in to feelings of despair or hopelessness, we can look to Jeremiah's words from the Lord and be encouraged just as the Jewish exiles were. Rest assured that God has not forgotten you, no matter where you are or what you are involved in. The Lord also promises that He has good plans for you and wants you to have hope in the future. You can seek the Lord and know you can count on Him to be there for you when you seek Him with all your heart (see Jeremiah 29:13).

- ? What needs to change for you to entrust your future plans to the Lord?
- ? How should seeking the Lord as this passage describes lead us to gospel conversations with others?

Prayer of Response

Thank God for being with you and caring about you, no matter your circumstances. Commit to seeking the Lord with your whole heart and express gratitude that God promises to be found by you.

Prayer Prompts:

Reflect on these thoughts in your prayer time and pray through them.

- What truths about God can you meditate on, even when life looks much different than you expected? What can you still trust about Him?
- In what areas of life do you feel forgotten by God? Ask Him to reveal himself to you in those areas.
- What do you have trouble believing God has good plans for? Reflect on Jeremiah 29:11 as you pray about this.

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Jeremiah* by Steven Smith
- *Be Decisive* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Jeremiah and Lamentations* by Philip Graham Ryken

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC

For Next Week

Session Title

- Pray

Main Passages

- Acts 4:23-31; Philippians 4:6-7

Session Outline

1. Powerful Prayer (Acts 4:23-28)
2. Answered Prayer (Acts 4:29-31)
3. Practical Prayer (Philippians 4:6-7)

Memorize

*“For I know the plans I have for you”—this is the Lord’s declaration—
“plans for your well-being, not for disaster, to give you a future and a
hope.” - Jeremiah 29:11*

Historical Context of Jeremiah

Purpose

Jeremiah is the prophet of the “word of the Lord” (1:2). Of the 349 times the OT uses the phrase “thus says the Lord,” Jeremiah accounts for 157 of them. But this prophetic word that Jeremiah spoke was more than an objective revelation from God to the nation; God’s words were to be joy and food for Jeremiah’s own soul. As 15:16 states, “Your words were found, and I ate them. Your words became a delight to me and the joy of my heart.” However, God’s word was sometimes a burden to the prophet. He sometimes grew tired of bringing God’s message of judgment to an unresponsive people.

The people felt immune to any threat of divine judgment, but Jeremiah repeatedly warned them about the vanity of their reliance on ritual and external formalism. The prophetic word of God was to make the people blush and turn away from meaningless outward piety.

Author

Jeremiah was a priest from the town of Anathoth (1:1). At the Lord’s command, he neither married nor had children because of the impending judgment that would come upon the next generation. His ministry as a prophet began in 626 BC and ended after 586 BC. He was a contemporary of Habakkuk and possibly Obadiah.

Setting

The book of Jeremiah discusses the last days of Judah. King Hezekiah reigned for forty-two years (729–686 BC) and began to reverse Judah’s spiritual bankruptcy. But when Hezekiah’s son, Manasseh, came to the throne, idolatrous and superstitious cultic practices and rites came back like a flood. Manasseh’s son Amon ruled for only two years (642–640 BC). He also reinstated idol worship as the official religion of Judah (2Ch 33:22–23).

Amon’s eight-year-old son, Josiah, succeeded him on the throne. This lad “walked in the ways” of the former King David. When he was eighteen years old (622 BC), he called for long-delayed repairs to be made to the temple. During this work, a copy of the law of Moses was found. On the basis of hearing this word, the young king and all his people renewed the covenant with the Lord. However, this reformation failed to overcome the effects of the wickedness Manasseh and Amon had instituted.

Special Features

The book and prophet Jeremiah hold at least two great distinctions among all the Old Testament prophets. (1) This is the longest Prophetic Book in the Bible (1,364 verses). (2) Jeremiah’s life is more fully described than any of the other fifteen writing prophets. Into the tumultuous times of the last half of the seventh century and the first quarter of the sixth century BC, came this prophet bearing a word from God for the stubborn people of Judah. The book’s contents span roughly from 640 to 580 BC.

Extended Commentary

Jeremiah 29:1-14

29:1–3. Chapter 29 is linked with the previous chapter by literary proximity, historical context, and common vocabulary. As these first three verses make clear, Jeremiah writes a letter to the Judean community in Babylonian exile, that is, to those Judeans taken into exile with Jehoiachin in 597 b.c. Although much of the chapter is taken up with the substance of that letter, it contains references to other messages that have gone back and forth from the two communities of Judeans. Jeremiah entrusts his letter to the Judeans in Babylon to Elasah the son of Shaphan (presumably the brother of Ahikam, who had earlier kept Jeremiah from the lynch mob) and to Gemariah the son of Hilkiyah the priest—two official Judean messengers (ambassadors?) sent by Zedekiah to Babylon on state business.

Several prophets and diviners among the Judean exiles have provoked the community with announcements of the imminent demise of Babylon and a return of the exiles to Judah (29:8–9, 15, 21–28). They are like Hananiah (ch. 28) in their orientation. Some of the agitators are named (Ahab and Zedekiah, 29:21–22; Shemaiah, 29:24), although nothing else is preserved about them beside what is contained in this chapter. Most likely they are prominent figures among the exiles. Shemaiah, for example, has communicated directly with the priest named Zephaniah, who is in charge of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem (29:25–26). These figures show awareness that Jeremiah’s prophecies are known in Babylon.

The prophet’s letter reinforces his previous prophecies that God has granted Babylon hegemony, that the duration of Babylonian sovereignty has decades to run (cf. 25:12), and that only then will there be restoration (cf. 24:6–7). What is new in chapter 29 is the instruction to settle down in Babylon and to pray for the city. The exiles are to “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” (29:7).

Chapter 29 contains the same charges against the exilic prophets as was made against Hananiah in chapter 28. They cause the people to trust in a lie (28:15; 29:9, 21, 23, 31; cf. 7:4), and their words are, in effect, rebellion against the Lord (29:31–32; cf. 28:15–16). Jeremiah’s struggle against prophets who prophesy falsely in the Lord’s name extends even to the exilic community. The book of Ezekiel carries on this struggle to present the exilic community with God’s word.

29:4–9. The first line of the letter contains a shocking truth, but it points to the good news to follow. God is the subject of the phrase “all those I carried into exile.” Of course, the previous verses noted that Nebuchadnezzar was the historical agent who took the people into exile, but in verse 4 the theological point is made that it is actually the work of God himself. The affirmation is followed by the commands to settle down in exile and to carry out such functions of sedentary existence as building, planting, and marriage. Exile is not the end of existence as God’s people, but the beginning of a new phase of relating to God. The people are not to rebel against the authority of Babylon because, in effect, it is the authority of God over them for a prescribed time.

More positively, the people are to seek the prosperity of Babylon because it will affect them as well. Most important, they are to pray for their captors.

29:10–14. These hopeful verses help prepare readers for the section that follows in the prophetic book, a section known to interpreters as the Book of Consolation. Jeremiah notes that the future of the people in exile rests on God’s “gracious promise” (v. 10; lit., God’s “good word”). In verse 11 the gracious promise is described as plans God has for the people, plans for a “prosperity” (šalom, peace) that provides a future and “hope” (tiqwa). A tangible element to the future consists in the restoration of the people to their homeland. The restoration, however, is predicated on their seeking God with their whole heart.¹

References

1. J. Andrew Dearman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2002), 261–262.

Author Bio

Steven Smith (Exalting Jesus in Jeremiah and Lamentations)

Steven W. Smith is senior pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Arkansas. He is the author of three books on preaching: *Dying to Preach*, *Recapturing the Voice of God*, and *Preaching for the Rest of us* (with Robby Gallaty).

Warren Wiersbe (Be Decisive)

Warren W. Wiersbe, former pastor of the Moody Church and general director of *Back to the Bible*, has traveled widely as a Bible teacher and conference speaker. Because of his encouragement to those in ministry, Dr. Wiersbe is often referred to as “the pastor’s pastor.” He has ministered in churches and conferences throughout the United States as well as in Canada, Central and South America, and Europe. Dr. Wiersbe has written over 150 books, including the popular BE series of commentaries on every book of the Bible, which has sold more than four million copies. At the 2002 Christian Booksellers Convention, he was awarded the Gold Medallion Lifetime Achievement Award by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. Dr. Wiersbe and his wife, Betty, live in Lincoln, Nebraska.

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Philip Graham Ryken (DPhil, University of Oxford) is the eighth president of Wheaton College. He preached at Philadelphia’s Tenth Presbyterian Church from 1995 until his appointment at Wheaton in 2010. Ryken has published more than 50 books, including *When Trouble Comes* and expository commentaries on Exodus, Ecclesiastes, and Jeremiah. He serves as a board member for the Gospel Coalition, the Lausanne Movement, and the National Association of Evangelicals.

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