

# 29 This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. <sup>2</sup> (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the craftsmen had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) <sup>3</sup> He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said:

# <sup>4</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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.’ <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD.

# <sup>10</sup> This is what the LORD says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> 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 hope and a future. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and will bring you back from captivity. <sup>[a]</sup> I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.’

# This passage contains one of the most often quoted verses of the old testament - Verse 11 :<sup>11</sup> 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 hope and a future.’ How many of you have something in your house with those words on them – a mug, a plaque, a key ring even? If you look in Koorong bookshop, you’ll find it all over their range of gifts. And with good reason: They are beautiful words of comfort and hope.

We’re going to see that in this passage God told His people that He would turn them from being # refugees to residents, mourners into missionaries, and victims into visionaries. (By the way I wasn’t smart enough to think of those headings myself. I got them from the author Christopher Wright in his book “The Message of Jeremiah.”

Let’s look at what was happening when God said those words to his people.

## For a long time Jeremiah the prophet had predicted that the people of Israel would be taken into captivity. And it had happened. Here Jeremiah, in Jerusalem, is writing a letter. This letter was written after the Babylonian army of King Nebuchadnezzar had defeated the Israelites and taken many of them into captivity in Babylon. # Although they had been warned, they had continued to worship false gods, ignoring the prophesies of Jeremiah. And now they were forced to live in exile.

# As we read this part of Jeremiah, the question arises: who exiled these Jews to Babylon? # In verse 1, it tells us that Nebuchadnezzar took them. In the letter, # in verse 4, God says that **He** sent them into exile. So who did? Was it Nebuchadnezzar or was it God? Of course the answer is that both of them did. Humanly speaking, we see Nebuchadnezzar’s army committing violence against the people, defeating them, and dragging many away to Babylon. They were responsible for committing evil deeds against the Jewish people.

Many Jews felt that God had abandoned them. They could not understand how this could have happened to the people who were known as God’s people. This despite the many warnings that the prophet Jeremiah had spoken to them. They thought they could ignore God and His commands, yet still claim His protection. When it didn’t happen they felt abandoned by God.

So once again Jeremiah speaks – as the mouthpiece of God. And God tells them, “*I* sent you into exile.” What a shock for the people – God was behind this terrible happening? This cruel defeat of God’s people – this exile into a foreign land *didn’t* mean that God was defeated, or that God had abandoned them. God was not a God who operated and answered prayer only in the country of Israel. God was not just a local God! It wasn’t an accident that the people were there in exile in Babylon.

# And God tells them in Jeremiah’s letter not to live as refugees, but to live as residents. They are not to live as though this exile is a short-term temporary situation. God tells them to settle down in the situation where they are. He says, # “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters in marriage; multiply there, and do not decrease.” It’s like God is saying to those people: Get a life in your current situation. Don’t just sit and mourn for the days gone by. Make the most of your current situation.

This is a far cry from Psalm 137, where the singer writes: How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

If I forget you, o Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill.”

He goes on to pray for the destruction of the Babylonians.

But in Jeremiah’s letter, God is telling them to move on from that. To live life to the full in the place where they are forced to be. To accept that this is the situation He has them in for now. To remember that whatever the situation – God is Sovereign – everything is not out of control – God is still in control.

Perhaps also today in this time of fear from Corona virus, uncertainty about vaccines, and rejection of God, we need to live as the people of God, who are quietly unafraid, who are accepting of our present situation, who live in peace and joy despite all the talking, blame calling, restrictions, and unrest of our times. Why not? We can have confidence that even in this situation our God is still at work. Even though it feels like the world is out of control, and some people feel as though God is sitting on His hands and not doing anything about it, we can live confidently because God has not left us. Our great Sovereign God has not lost the plot. He is still at work, and we can live as confident residents of this alien world.

# The people of Israel had been given a mission by God. They were to show His glory to the other nations, they were to be a blessing to all nations. So their current situation was not a catastrophe – it was an opportunity to show another nation what being God’s people was really like. They were to be missionaries, not mourners!

Sometimes we Christians (especially we older Christians) spend a lot of time lamenting that society today is not what it used to be. The message God gave to the Israelites seems to be appropriate here: we need to live to the full in the society where God has placed us. We need to show God’s glory by our joy and our love, and our contentment, not by lamenting times past. Be missionaries, not mourners.

# God says, “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 people of Israel were not just to accept their situation – they were to pray for the prosperity and well being of those who had brought them into it – their enemies! What a surprising and probably unwelcome message for them. What a difficult thing for them to do.

Doesn’t this seem pretty much like the same message that Jesus gave hundreds of years later; He said, (recorded in Matt. 5:43-45)

# “<sup>43</sup> ‘You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbour<sup>□</sup> and hate your enemy.” <sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

It’s a radical thought - and it’s just as hard to do today as it was then. Do we pray for blessings for our cities – where sometimes we as Christians feel like exiles in a foreign land? Do we pray for the prosperity and well-being of those who inhabit our neighbourhoods – even those who behave in antisocial and unpleasant ways? Do we give time to being practical helpers for people in the city who are in need? Do we love our neighbours as we love ourselves? Are we living up to our mission to be a light to all people? Philipians

tells us we are to shine like stars in the universe. No qualifications. Light shines brightest when the situation around it is darkest!

I still remember years ago when I was in a group of people being taken through an underground cave on Kangaroo Island. The guide said, "Now we're going to turn out all the lights so you can see what it's like to have a total absence of light. The lights went off, but there was still a gentle glow of light that enabled us to still see our surroundings and fellow cave walkers. What was it?"

# I suddenly realised that it was coming from the screen of my mobile phone, which I hurriedly shoved up my jumper as dozens of accusing eyes were turned my way! I'd never really noticed the glow when I was up on top in the sunshine, but it seemed really bright in that otherwise pitch darkness. Our little lights will shine extra brightly when the situation around is dark and gloomy.

Let's not be mourners, longing for days gone by, but let's be missionaries shining God's light into the darkness.

In Jeremiah's day there were prophets who were telling the people that they should not accept their situation – that they should expect God to remove them from it soon. Jeremiah's letter probably was not a popular prophecy. The people wanted their answers and their relief from their situation – now! And the popular prophets claimed to hear from God but actually were just telling people what they wanted to hear.

Sometimes God doesn't change our situation quickly. His plans and purposes for us, and for the world in which we live, are bigger than just our comfort. His plans are to bring glory to His Name. What are your plans? Do they bring glory to the Name of God?

In Jeremiah's letter to the Jews in Babylon, he tells them that while their situation isn't going to change quickly, he does have plans for them. When the time of their judgment for their sins is over, their situation **is** going to change.

He tells them it will be 70 years until Babylon receives its judgment, and the people of Israel are able to return to Jerusalem. God is a God of justice, and He is also a God of mercy. Although the reason the people of Israel are suffering now is because of their sin, and their rejection of God, He has not rejected them. There will be mercy, and there is hope for a better future. God says,

# <sup>11</sup> 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 hope and a future.'

God wants His people to have hope. They are to be visionaries and not victims. Their situation is temporary. And while they wait, they have a mission – to be the people of God in a foreign country, and to pray for those people in that land. Even in the midst of judgment there is hope! Even when bad things are happening to God's people there is hope! God's purposes are always for the ultimate good of His people.

And as God proclaims His good purposes – hope and a future, He tells His people more of what He will do, and what their response is to be.

# <sup>12</sup> Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> I will be found by you,' declares the LORD, 'and will bring you back from captivity. <sup>[a]</sup> I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,' declares the LORD, 'and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.'

God is proclaiming an end to captivity, an end to their exile. And they are to respond by calling on God, by praying to Him, by seeking Him with all their hearts.

# The story of Daniel (yes, the one famed for surviving in the lions' den) is a story of someone in captivity in Babylon near the end of the seventy years told by God. And Daniel was doing just what Jeremiah's prophecy said – he was praying. He was seeking God every day. He lived an outstanding life, and had responsibilities in his country of exile. He was a resident, not a refugee. He was a missionary. He stood up and told the king that he would worship only the one true God, not the king himself as the law proclaimed. And God honoured him, as he had honoured God. And the king who had commanded him to be thrown into the lion's den made a decree that people were to fear the God of Daniel. He said,

"for he is the living God, enduring forever, his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end.

He delivers and rescues;  
 he works signs and wonders  
 in heaven and on earth,  
 he who has saved Daniel  
 from the power of the lions.”

Daniel was a missionary to those people in his country of exile. Through him, people came to know and understand the power of the living God.

Daniel refused to be a victim. Daniel followed and worshipped God continually, even though the pressure was on him to abandon God and fit into the culture around him.

These are tough times for many people. In our culture in this day, God does not get the respect that He should. Our culture prizes human wisdom more than the wisdom and truth of God. It is easy for us as Christians to see ourselves as victims – victims of disrespect, and of mockery as we strive to obey and worship our God.

# But let's not live as victims, let's live as visionaries. God's people *have* a vision – we have a vision of a future and a hope because our God has good plans for us.

# We are residents of our world – who continue to bless our neighbours, our country, and our world. We devote time and energy to praying for them and loving them. Let's continue to pray blessings on our neighbours and our workmates, and our employers, on our leaders of government and of our churches. Is your mouth full of blessings for others, or do you go out of here with words of complaint and bitterness? Which words will glorify God and show His true character to those who don't know Him?

Do you go out as a mourner or a missionary? God has called each one of us to live as lights in the world. To share His Word with the nations.

Do you go out from here as a victim of our times, or as a visionary who has hope and eagerness for the future that God has planned for you? Does the glory of God fill your eyes each day as you pray to Him and spend time in His Word? Or are your eyes fixed on the evils of this world, and on your own struggles. Are you seeking God? God wants to be found – by us, and by the nations.

### **Prayer:**

Our mighty and glorious God, in the precious name of our Saviour Jesus,

we bless our city. We bless the people who live and work in the neighbourhood around this church and around our homes. We bless them with peace. We bless them with prosperity and the joy that comes from knowing You.

We bless our workmates and our employers. We bless our families and those who put us down and treat us badly. We bless the people sitting with us today in this building, and those who are away from us for various reasons. We bless them with divine encounters, so their hearts may be softened towards the living God.

And now a blessing for the Christians at Toowoomba North,

I bless you in the name of Jesus Christ that you may attract people to meet with God and know God personally so that their lives are realigned to God's good plans and purposes for them.

We pray that we will be residents, we will be missionaries, we will be visionaries who look forward with hope to our future, because we know you have good plans for us. We praise your glorious name.