

## **“Flourishing in Exile”**

Sermon Series Strangers in a Strange Land

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(Jeremiah 29:1-14)

We are currently in our Lenten sermon series dealing with what it means as God's people to live in exile and living in exile. That is living in a place where you are not the dominant thought producer. You're not the dominant culture influencer and brings with it, specific challenges. This morning we're going to turn to the book of Jeremiah the 29th chapter, a chapter that at least one verse in the verses we'll read this morning. A great number of people know you may have it on a picture at home. You may have it on a license plate, a bumper sticker. We'll talk a little bit more about that in a minute, but this is the Prophet Jeremiah speaking to God's people who find themselves in exile. They were exiled because they were conquered by a king named Nebuchadnezzar, and a portion of the people were taken into exile in Babylon and there were false prophets in Babylon who were misleading God's people. So, God spoke to Jeremiah and said, here's what I want you to go tell my people. You will speak for me as we've prepared a turn. And Look at Isaiah 29 this morning.

Would you join me as we pray, gracious and loving God, we thank you for the gift of your word. And we asked this morning that your Holy Spirit might give us ears to hear your voice. A new, and my prayer is that the loudest voice in this room, in the next few moments might be the voice of your Holy Spirit's speaking to your people. It's in Christ's name that we pray. Amen.

In verse one of Jeremiah 29 we find these words. 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. This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem. 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. We're going to stop right there for a second.

We often read about God's people going into exile in the Old Testament, and I find a great many people in their mind, they see the entire nation be taken somewhere. That's not the way ancient kings took conquered nations into exile. The conquering king would go and select the people from the population he had conquered to take into exile. And kings and queens in that day were very smart. They were strategic. They would take the most skilled people because the skilled people were the ones who could help that conquered nation, regain its strength again.

So, the king or queen would take the most skilled people, the most influential people, and they would be the ones that go into exile. And that is who Jeremiah is about to issue God's prophecy.

And the letter that he carried said this, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. It's important. What does God say that I carried into exile? Part of the reason the false prophets were gaining ground on God's people in Babylon was that they were holding Nebuchadnezzar responsible for them being in exile, when in reality they're in exile because they rebelled for generations against God. And God finally said, you need to learn a lesson that is going to take a change of venue for you to learn. And God makes it clear, I carried you into exile. Nebuchadnezzar conquered you. But he didn't carry you into exile. I carried you into exile. And that's important because if God carries anyone anywhere, God goes with them and God stays with them.

He goes on, build houses and settle down plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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. 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. 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 encouraged them to have. They are prophesies and lies to you in my name I have not sent them, declares the Lord. God tells his people, live where I carried you, live. Get married, have children, build homes, work hard. That is your home. Live your life. Life from the beginning pages of scripture is meant to be a gift from God. Wherever we find ourselves, be it in exile or be it in the promise land. It's a gift to be lived.

That is what God is telling his people. You will flourish in exile. If you live where I've carried you, you will flourish if you live where I've carried you. The diviners and the false prophets were telling the people exactly what they wanted to hear. They were saying two years, hold on, two years and your back, you're going back. Now the message that sends to God's people we're only here for two years. What's the point? What's the point in having a house? We're just going to leave. What's the point in really trying to, to find productive work to contribute. We're outta here. So rather we can be obstructionist. We can just stand here, rail on the king and say we're going home soon. But God says Jeremiah, tell them that's not the case and he goes on. This is what the Lord says when 70 years are completed in Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. Now I'm not good at math. I don't know about you, but there is a significant difference between two and seventy. Sixty-eight to be exact. And the people that were getting this news from Jeremiah, this word from God, that meant the chances were good they were never going back. But God told them to live. That was their key to flourishing even though it's going to be 70 years and I will fulfill my good promise to you-live, live.

I will come to you and fulfill my good promise. I don't know about you, but I think if I got that word from Jeremiah and I knew I don't have seventy years, I got two, but I don't have seventy. I

don't know how good a promise I could see that as. It doesn't sound like all that great a deal to me. But it's God's good promise to his people.

And here's the verse that we see on everything. Tim and I were at a conference week before last week the conference venue had had a bookstore. It was a church and had a bookstore. And I walked in because I like books and I thought, hmm, it will probably have some good books. They had very few books in the bookstore, but they had tables and cases and walls full of Christian ISED things, pillows, pictures, bumper stickers. And I saw this verse on a number of them. Verse 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. Yay God. Right? Yay God. There's just one little problem. If you, if you take a Bible class, they will tell you there's this thing called proof texting and proof texting's where you take a verse and you, you take it out of the context in which it was spoken and you apply it to something else. And we're guilty of doing that with, with a lot of versus this being one of them because boy to our western ears. Doesn't that sound great? I know the plans I have for you says the Lord. Plans to prosper you. I'm going to be rich. I'm going to be comfortable. That is not what God is saying. The word that is translated in most of our English bibles as prosper is Shalom means peace, deep abiding peace, not rich and comfortable.

Deep and abiding peace. That's the plan I have for you. The other way we twist that verse by taking it out of context is you, is not singular. You is y'all. If Jeremiah knew good English when he transcribed this, he would've said y'all to make it clear. I know the plans I have for Y'all says, Lord. He's prophesied to a group of people, but we, there again, our western mindset, we hear prosper and we think rich and comfortable. We hear you and we think it's, it's about me because everything's really about me, right? But God's promise is that I, my plan for you as deep and abiding wholesome piece for your life, for all y'all. I think what God's really trying to get us to understand. Then in verse 12 you will call on me and come and pray to me and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me. And when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and 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 will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile. You see the, the way to really flourish in exile for God's people then and for God's people now. It's to understand that if we seek and trust God, he will grant us his good plan, which is his Shalom for us, his deep and abiding and wholesome peace that is far greater than any amount of money or any comfort we can ever as an individual imagine. You See, God calls us to seek and to trust him so that we might know his Shalom, his deep and abiding peace.

And if we can do that, we'll learn how to flourish wherever God has carried us. As a church, as y'all, all of us, are we being faithful to seek and to trust God for his deep peace in our life. Is our goal, is our vision together to seek and trust God so that we might know God's deep and abiding peace so that we can flourish in exile as God's people. Because what God's people flourish in exile. They begin to share God and his goodness and His grace through Jesus Christ with the people around them and maybe just maybe God's purpose for his people in exile is not that they become rich and comfortable, but they become people who point others to what

deep and abiding peace really is. And in our day that means we point people to Christ grace and his mercy, the one who truly knew exile because he left the throne of heaven and put on flesh and lived among us. I suspect it was no cake walk, been exiled to Babylon, but I know it was no cake walk to leave the right hand of God and put on flesh to be with us. Let's face it, we don't enjoy being with us a lot of the time.

As a church, as a small group, as a Sunday school class, as a choir, however you're engaged with other believers, are you seeking and trusting God to give you his deep and abiding peace? Or are we plucking the promises of scripture out while we're in exile and changing the Y'all's to me's? And forfeiting the deep and abiding grace, peace and love of God. My challenge for you this morning for Y'all this morning, you seek and trust God, but you might find his deep and abiding peace. Shalom, y'all.

Father, we are grateful. We are grateful for your word. We're grateful for your people who sought God's heart. We're grateful for your prophets who had the courage to speak your word to your people, and we pray that you would raise up your prophets in our day and speak to us as we wrestle with living at times in exile, and that your Holy Spirit might be at work in us encouraging, teaching and admonishing us to seek and to trust you that we might find and know your deep and abiding peace. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.