

Settle into exile

Jeremiah 29:4-19

“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.” Jeremiah 29:11. It’s a famous Bible verse. It’s one of those ‘words of encouragement’ that people share with each other in conversation, in texts and messages, and in Christian greeting cards.

Those of you who have been Christians for some length of time have probably both sent and received this verse more than once in making sense of life and faith together. This morning, it’s not my intention to demolish that ‘verse of encouragement’ thing.

But at the start of a new year, learning the situation that God was speaking into when He spoke these words may help us learn the kind of future that God is unlocking for His people - and that it’s not what we might choose for ourselves.

We tend to share Jeremiah 29:11 with people when they’re going through something difficult, confusing, unsettling. Maybe a period of change and uncertainty. Or perhaps we look it up to take comfort from it ourselves in the times that we face that stuff. We’re motivated by the hope that God says to us or to the one we love, ‘I’m going to change things for you and make things better.’ Or perhaps the hope that God says, ‘You can’t see how just now, but I’m using all these difficult things to build something really good for you later.’

But that’s not the story that God tells the people of Judah in Jeremiah 29. God told Jeremiah to write a letter to the exiles from Judah who had been deported to the nation of their invaders, Babylon. God’s people had been removed from their homeland and forced to begin a new life in a new place - with a foreign culture, a foreign language, and even foreign gods. They were homesick prisoners and slaves here. These were dark circumstances.

But for 23 years before that happened, God had been persistently warning the nation of Judah through Jeremiah’s preaching that this would happen unless they listened to God telling them, ‘turn away from the other gods and idols that you devote yourselves to.’ For a whole generation, God’s people had at best half-heartedly split their devotion between God and other things that they actually loved more, and at worst had completely ignored God in favour of the idols they valued but that actually caused them and others harm.

The circumstances they are experiencing in chapter 29 are at God's hand - v. 4, the Lord Almighty begins, 'This is what I have to say to those / carried into exile.' It's the same language in v.7 and v.14. Read the chapters of Jeremiah leading up to this one, and you find out why. This exile is a punishment for their rebellion against God. Their putting off of giving up what God kept telling them to give up. Their refusal to have God alone as the defining Lord of their life and community.

And God's word to His exiled people in Jeremiah 29 is not, 'Don't worry, I'm going to make it all better soon.' Nor is it, 'You can't see how just now, but I'm using all these difficult things to build something really good for you later.'

Instead, God says this: 'Settle down into these circumstances. Because you're not heading out of them anytime soon. You *can* see why you're here and how I'm going to use it. You're here because for years and years you ignored my warnings and gave your heart to other things. You're here because by going through this homesickness, you will finally humble yourselves and turn your hearts fully to me.'

The false prophets mentioned in vv.8-9 had been saying, 'God won't let Babylon get us - bad things won't happen.' Then, when bad things did happen, they said, 'Okay, they got us. But God won't let this last long - He will surely set us free from this in two years.' They taught what people wanted to believe.

In reply to these many voices, God told Jeremiah to stand firm with this message: 'I don't want to rescue my people from this disaster. I never said I would. In fact, I said I wouldn't. I said that death or exile are coming to them, because they have not turned from their other gods. There is no rescue without repentance. And it's going to take not two years of captivity, but seventy - a *lifetime* of exile - for them to finally turn back to me with their whole hearts.'

It may be that God brings you through an exile experience. It may be that He brings us all as a church family through something like this. A period of dark or desperate circumstances that causes all the settled pieces in our lives to shuffle around and become reshaped. Identity-shifting stuff. Priority-sorting stuff. Stuff that reopens the question of what you'll shape your heart and your hope around.

There's one crucial difference between us and the people of Judah in Jeremiah 29. In between our experiences came Jesus Christ. Jesus, who lived the perfect God-oriented life. Jesus, who died on the cross for this purpose: To take the punishment we deserve for a life of turning our backs on God and putting idols of our own choosing on the throne. Jesus, who rose to life victorious over our sin, our death, and our petty alternative gods.

Now, God does not punish twice. Since Jesus has taken the punishment for you - since you believe that and put your hope in that - God does not *punish* you through exile experiences. The awful thing Judah faced was a God who was angry at them and poured out His wrath on them.

The wonderful, incredible thing we face is the same God who may yet be angered by our rebellion, but who directed His wrath for that onto Jesus on a cross 2000 years ago. He is not punishing you. The punishment was fully taken by the Son of God, such is God's incredible mercy and love for you.

Yet God may still give us over into exile experiences for the same heart-changing purpose that He had for the people of Judah in Jeremiah 29. vv. 10-14 describe God restoring His people and delivering them from the exile after this lifelong period of them turning their hearts *fully* to Him.

It may be the you - or we - must go through a surprisingly long period of being where we don't want to be. And if it is, and you are searching for meaning in it, Jeremiah 29 teaches us these are questions worth searching this new year, more so than 'what food am I going to cut back on?' or 'what exercise will I take up?':

In what ways am I holding back my whole heart from God? What causes me to be half-hearted towards God? What am I putting off getting rid of?

In earlier chapters of Jeremiah, God had actually offered His rebellious people a choice when Babylon was bashing down their doors. Here it is in Jeremiah 21:8-9 - 'Furthermore, tell the people, "This is what the Lord says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague. But whoever goes out and surrenders to the Babylonians who are besieging you will live; he will escape with his life.'

What a strange choice for God to give His people! Go and surrender to being enslaved by an oppressor who worships other gods, or stay where you are and end up dying a pretty brutal death. God fills things out a little more in

chapter 24, when He gives Jeremiah a picture of two baskets of figs - one of good figs, one of figs so bad they were only good for throwing out. Here's how God explains it in 24:5-10...

'This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: Like these good figs, I regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I sent away from this place to the land of the Babylonians. My eyes will watch over them for their good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not tear them down; I will plant them and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.'

'But like the poor figs, which are so bad that they cannot be eaten, (says the Lord,) so will I deal with Zedekiah king of Judah, his officials and the survivors from Jerusalem, whether they remain in this land or live in Egypt. I will make them abhorrent and an offence to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, an object of ridicule and cursing, wherever I banish them. I will send the sword, famine and plague against them until they are destroyed from the land I gave to them and their fathers.'

So we've got two kinds of people. Those who hear and believe what God says He will do, and surrender to that, however strange and even dark that may seem. And those who won't listen, bury their heads in the sand, dig in stubbornly, or say 'God wouldn't really say that so I'm ignoring it.' The first lot do something in response to God telling them to. The second lot don't.

And the first lot - those who are willing to enter into the experience of exile - have hope and a future before them. What God values in them is a heart inclined fully to Him. He sees the potential for that in them; He'll use the exile experience to bring it about. The end of the story for them, beyond the exile, is coming home.

But the second lot - those who will not respond the way that God Almighty shows them how - have no hope or future before them. The end of their story is death. Sword, famine or plague are the three things before them.

And all of this is played out in the letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29. vv.10-14 describe the 'coming home,' the hope and the future and the prospering, that are coming to God's people who through exile turn their whole hearts to God. And vv.15-19 pick up the language of sword, famine and plague - the death that is the destiny for those who listen to the lies of false prophets and think they are better off where they are than where God tells them to be.

The great news is that the choice of future God presents to us today is not between death or an enemy who is against us, but between death or a friend who is for us. God still tells us, 'See, I set before you the way of life and the way of death.' He still bids us to choose life. These days, it's all wrapped up in Jesus. Make a deliberate move to surrender to Jesus - let *Him* be Lord - and the result is life forever. Don't make a move, stay where you are, and the result is death forever.

That much most of you know already - I'm preaching to the choir, right? But here's the light that God's Word in Jeremiah sheds on this choice to follow Jesus. It doesn't make everything all nice. There's no promise of difficult circumstances changing. Much more likely is that you'll discover you have to go through something for a long time until your heart is fully inclined to God over a lifetime.

And even then - even if you get ahead of the rest of us and get to a point where you can honestly say, 'My heart is only for God' - He sets the time for your exile experience. You don't get to say, 'That'll do now, God, you can ease off because I'm all yours now.'

Taken as a whole, the Bible pictures this life taken as a whole as an exile experience. Since the Garden of Eden, God warned that death is the result of rebellion against Him, but when it came, He was kind enough to give Adam and Eve exile instead, so human beings had time and opportunity to turn their hearts back to God and journey home to Him. The rest of the Old Testament is full of stories of exile and coming home to God with hearts newly inclined to Him.

And the message of Jesus was that people could come home to God, now and forever, through Him - as they repented of the things they'd put ahead of God, and turned their hearts back to the God they'd abandoned. For every follower of Jesus, there's an eternal home we're heading for - *that's* the prospering, the hope and the future that God really has for us. But there are exile experiences to shape our hearts towards that God and towards that home on the way. The message of Jeremiah 29 is: Settle into exile.

There's a little bit of 'swallow your medicine' here. The disturbing and confusing circumstances you're in that you'd rather not be might not taste great. But going through it is emptying your heart of things that used to seem important but are shown up as hollow.

And it's filling your heart with a new dependence, a new 'I can't do this, God, I need you, you're the only One who can cut it.' Value the making of a new heart towards God above all else. Because God values above all else amongst these exiles He's speaking to. The 'fully new heart' people are the ones who get to come home to Him.

As well as that, there's a strange twist of blessing that comes through the exile experience. Not a blessing *to* you, so much as a blessing that comes *through* you to others. vv.5-6 instruct God's people to build houses, plant gardens, settle, marry, increase in number. It's an instruction that teaches them they are going to be where they don't want to be for a while, so they might as well settle in.

But then v.7 teaches us to look outside of ourselves in the strange territory we find ourselves in. '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.'

Maybe you're in Inverness and you don't really want to be. Maybe you're leaving Inverness, and you don't really want to be. Settle down, seek the peace and prosperity of the city you're in. And pray for the place God has you.

Beyond the geographical, there are plenty of exile experiences. The job you didn't imagine or want. The news you didn't imagine or want. The new shape and dynamics of your family... or your neighbours... or your colleagues... or our church. The sense of 'I am not at home here, so why am I here?' Not only does God have you settle down in these exile experiences to develop a heart fully inclined to Him - it's also for you to bless and reach out to those who are only around you because this is where God's put you.

What exile experiences are you going through? Who is only near you because of these experiences? How can you bless these people, and how do you pray for them?

For a church who use John 10:10 as a strap line: 'Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" and whose vision is for people to discover and share that life is infinitely better in Jesus than apart from Him, there's some important lessons here about what a 'full life' is, what a 'better' life is, and what we need to be careful about telling ourselves and each other.

We've spoken much in Luke's gospel of the Mission of God, most fully expressed in Jesus: It's releasing people. Setting human beings free from everything that detracts from life in all its fullness: sin, death, poverty, illness, oppression, injustice and more. That mission begins now in this life, but only gets fulfilled in eternity when all things are put right by Jesus.

When you're living in the hope of that message, it's easy to assume that the false prophets have got it right when they say: 'It's okay! God's going to set you free from this yoke that's binding you. Any minute now... Just wait, you'll see...' And then it's easy to get massively discouraged and be filled with doubts about this God and this mission of His when you're stuck in something you don't want for years on end.

But Jeremiah reminds us that there's no rescue without repentance. And beyond that, God often keeps you or even puts you in difficult experiences to renew and reshape you. If that takes a long time, even a lifetime, of some exile experience, then that's all part of how God is rescuing you and bringing you home.

There's a sort of homesick yearning that you feel in these situations, a 'Why am I here?' An 'I don't belong in this.' Faith in Jesus isn't going to take that away in this lifetime. If anything, it's going to heighten your sense that we're never really at home at all in this life - but we're hoping for the home we're heading for in the homesickness of this exile life. This life that draws cries to God ever deeper from our guts as we go along, filling our hearts ever more with the need of Him.

When we talk about life to the full, when we talk about life being better in Jesus than apart from Him, let's be careful not to misdirect anyone (or ourselves for that matter) that God is going to stop us going through anything really hard, or that He's going to make sure these experiences are no more than short term. God never said that. And He distanced Himself from the lies of the false prophets who said otherwise.

Next time you read Jeremiah 29:11, or you share it with someone else, remember what you're reading: That God has a great, great future ahead - a home with Him. But it's only for those who know that their hearts need to be more fully inclined to God, and who are willing to settle into the exile experiences that He'll use to make that happen.