

Living with Loss and Forging God's Future

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

7th in a nine-part series

August 21, 2011

©2011 Arthur Jones

Jeremiah 29:1-23 NRSV

¹ These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among 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 court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. ³ The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar 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 what they 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 the prophets and the 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, says the LORD.

¹⁰ For thus says the LORD: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says 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 live in this city, your kinsfolk who did not go out with you into exile: ¹⁷ Thus says the LORD of hosts, I am going to let loose on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like rotten figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten. ¹⁸ I will pursue them with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be an object of cursing, and horror, and hissing, and a derision among all the nations where I have driven them, ¹⁹ because they did not heed my words, says the LORD, when I persistently sent to you my servants the prophets, but they would not listen, says the LORD.

²⁰ But now, all you exiles whom I sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon, hear the word of the LORD: ²¹ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah son of Maaseiah, who are prophesying a lie to you in my name: I am going to deliver them into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and he shall kill them before your eyes. ²² And on account 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 perpetrated outrage in Israel and have committed adultery with their neighbors' wives, and have spoken in my name lying words that I did not command them; I am the one who knows and bears witness, says the LORD.

After six weeks of study, we have finally come to the point in scripture where the Israelites have experienced the consequences of their sin. The 29th chapter of Jeremiah is comprised primarily of words from Jeremiah (who is still in Jerusalem) to the early exiles in Babylon.

False Prophets

In the short letter to the exiles in Babylon, Jeremiah writes that they ought to be afraid of false prophets:

Throughout Jeremiah – both in good times and in bad – false prophets plague Jeremiah. Before destruction had come, false prophets did not proclaim the word of the Lord carefully. Jeremiah says that “They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.” Jeremiah 6:14

Before their destruction, God wanted his people to repent and the false prophets preached a false peace, a peace without repentance.

And we find in exile that false prophets have come up that God did not send. It appears in Jeremiah 29:26 that the false prophet Shemaiah is now proclaiming that their exile will be short and easy when Jeremiah is asking them to build houses and take wives, that exile will end quickly.

In both cases, the false prophets preach an easy message that is simply not true. As in Jeremiah’s day, we ought to be wary of any preacher or church that preaches an easy message that matches our comfortable life. It may not be true, and we might miss out on the true good that God is offering.

The difference in tone and content between this section and the previous texts that we have looked at within Jeremiah are striking. Before they experienced pain and destruction, Jeremiah’s message consisted primarily of warnings and prophecies of destruction and doom.

Consider, for example, Jeremiah’s proclamation in the 19th chapter. He is speaking to the elders of Jerusalem and to the priests God tells him to buy a pot, declare that Israel will be destroyed. God then tells him to do and say this:

Jeremiah 19:10-11 “Then you shall break the jug in the sight of those who go with you, ¹¹ and shall say to them: Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, so that it can never be mended.”

To those in exile – that have already experienced destruction, the tone is entirely different; God is not warning of doom, but rather promises a future. God is instructing the people whose hope has been destroyed to live and be happy even when their lives are no longer what they expected them to be. God is telling them that hope can be found even at the worst moments of their lives.

Look at the difference from the 19th chapter to the 29th:

Jeremiah 29:5-6 ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they 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.

Jeremiah’s proclamation has shifted dramatically from doom and judgment, to words of hope and life.

While at first this stark contrast might seem to indicate two disconnected messages, it is in fact the same overall point made throughout Jeremiah: that God wants good for his people. Beginning in the second chapter of Jeremiah, even in those parts that are difficult and where Jeremiah preaches about the forthcoming destruction, God’s purpose is always for his people to repent. God wants his people to turn away from their destruction.

Once the destruction has happened, God's nature doesn't change; God still wants to bring good to his people. Last week, we looked at the metaphor of God as the potter and Israel as the clay. All that the potter wants is for the clay to be molded into a fitting shape. Whether in good times or in bad, the purpose of the potter is always for the good of the clay.

One common aphorism about churches is that they are called to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. This doesn't mean that we have some churches that are called to do one and other churches that are called to do the other. All are called to preach the gospel. But it sounds different wherever you are in your life.

Jesus had a number of situations where people felt the call to follow him and they refused because it was too difficult. Matthew 19:16-30 tells of a young man who wanted to enter eternal life, and Jesus said that he was called to give away all of his possessions. Matthew tells us that "When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

The Gospel is always the same, but it may sound different where you are in your life. If you are comfortable, God may be asking you to be afflicted for the gospel. And if you are afflicted, God may be working right now on providing comfort.

As it says in the most famous verse in Jeremiah found in this passage: **Jeremiah 29:11**, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

From Those Who Live With Loss

This passage today has a special meaning for me, because I preached on it for a year when I worked with African Orphans. Jeremiah 29:11 is the theme verse for ZOE Ministry, a United Methodist Ministry that works with orphans due to HIV/AIDS, Genocide, Malaria and any other illness or violence in Rwanda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Zambia.

One girl that I met in Rwanda was named Angelique. When we met her, she had lost her mother, father, and grandfather and so at the age of 15 became both mother and father to her 12-year-old brother and 10-year-old sister. She cried to us when we first met her: "don't talk to me about God, if there is a God he doesn't love me."

When I met her a year and a half later, she invited me into her home and she greeted me with a bible in her hands. She described how she was able to make money by selling sorghum drink and that it was because God had brought about so much good in her life. This girl who, only a year and a half earlier, could barely speak through the tears was now laughing and giggling and giving thanks to the God that she had earlier denied. In fact, Angelique is now caring for other orphans in the community, and she was doing it on behalf of God. Like the exiles in Babylon, Angelique had found that in the darkest moments of our lives, God is working out good.

I do not believe that God causes pain; but I also believe that God will not waste it. Those five decades of exile in Babylon forged together some of the best pieces of scripture that we still hold sacred. Today, God is using Angelique's pain to proclaim hope to other orphans who are scared and hungry. If God can do this with Angelique, maybe he can do it with you.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Here is the idea: Last week we looked at the fact that even when God’s message is harsh and difficult, God’s primary and basic characteristic is love. Here, we find God’s love reaches even to the exiles in Babylon. Even after the exiles have been stripped of their homeland, God sends them a message that he is working out a good plan for his people.

All of us have experienced times of devastation and loss. How has good come out of previously horrible situations? If you are in a horrible situation right now, how can God work through this process to bring about some form of redemption?

Full redemption takes time. The false prophets were declaring that it would be a quick exile, and the truth was that it took five decades for the Jews to return home. God’s full plan for them did not come to fruition for six hundred years until God himself came in the person of Jesus Christ. How do we follow God, even in those moments where the healing process is taking a long time? Like the exiles, how do we find our daily lives in the middle of devastation? Can we be patient for God’s plans to come to fruition?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Jeremiah 30: 1-17 God’s plans for restoration	Tuesday, Jeremiah 30:17-23 God’s plans for Restoration continue...
Wednesday, Jeremiah 31:1-6 – God’s plans for Restoration continue...	Thursday, Jeremiah 31:7-14 God’s plans for Restoration continue...
Friday, Jeremiah 31:15-30 – God’s plans for Restoration continue...	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott’s Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

We will not meet on Aug 16

We will begin a new study of the gospel of John on August 23.

Join us whenever you can. Bring a study Bible.