

God's Word to Exiles from Home Jeremiah 29:1-14

Introduction

Tomorrow is our national holiday celebrating our independence as a nation. Like every nation on earth, we have our sins and our sorrows. But like every nation on earth, we owe God gratitude for the blessings we enjoy from His hand.

We are used to freedoms in America many never got to enjoy. God granted us great awakening and revival in the very years we were becoming a free nation. So in our founding documents we find reference to the Creator who has given us inalienable rights no human government has authority to take away. The words of God from Scripture adorn our national buildings and monuments. And foundational laws of the land acknowledge that both the governed and the governing answer to Almighty God.

But the Scriptures declare that born again people trusting in the Lord Jesus are also citizens of heaven, wherever they might live on earth.

Philippians 3:20

Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 11:13-16

These all died in faith . . . having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. . . . They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

That said, exiles and pilgrims have obligations to the territory where they reside as well as to their homeland. Peter talks about the challenges this "dual citizenship" creates.

1 Peter 2:11-12

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

If God were writing us a letter today about how to conduct our lives as exiles from home, dual citizens of a heavenly kingdom as well as an earthly nation, what would He say?

There is such a letter from God through Jeremiah to exiles from Judah taken captive to Babylon. We call Jeremiah the weeping prophet because he preached during the years before, during, and after the fall of

Jerusalem. He called for repentance before it was too late, but his preaching was ignored. He prophesied that the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity in Babylon were by the hand of God and was hated as a traitor because of his predictions.

His message to his people was one that repeatedly called for submission to God and what He was doing with the nation. The present looked bleak, but God was at work to bring them a future and a hope as they turned back to Him away from their idols.

In Jeremiah 29:1-14 we have recorded the letter God sent to the exiles in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem. How were they to conduct themselves there? God's Word to Exiles from Home.

¹ These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of 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 eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. ³ The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon

to Nebuchadnezzar king 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 their 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 your prophets and your 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, declares the LORD. ¹⁰ For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you

back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

1. God controls your history (4).
2. Grow where He has put you (5-6).
3. Seek the good of the city where you are (7).
4. Count on the promises of God (8-11).
5. Seek the Lord with all your heart (12-14).

1. God controls your history (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:

Yahweh of Hosts—God’s covenant name, “He is.”

Of Hosts—of armies—Israel, the angels, the stars of heaven

Elisha and his servant surrounded by horses and chariots of fire protecting them from being captured or hurt by the Syrian army who were struck with blindness (2 Kings 6)

2 Kings 6:16

He said, “Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who with them.”

God of Israel—the very name Israel reminds us of God’s power to transform not only situations but people from what they once were to what they should be (Jacob, the

deceiver, name changed to Israel, prince with God) in keeping with His faithful promises.

To all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

These words are not just from Jeremiah but from God Himself.

It was God who sent the Jewish exiles from Jerusalem to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was merely God's instrument in doing so.

Jeremiah 27:5-7

⁵ "It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to me. ⁶ Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. ⁷ All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes. Then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave.

As you read Jeremiah and the other prophets, it is clear that God holds nations accountable for their sins and brings judgment against those who refuse to repent. His chosen people Israel were not exempt from His sovereign rule. God exercises dominion over all the nations of the earth, not just over

Israel. He uses the nations to carry out His justice and to provoke turning back to Him. He sets up rulers and takes them down. He directs armies and blocks their path. He controls storms and earthquakes, fire and water, and every creature on the earth. Remember how He poured out the ten plagues on Egypt and forced Pharaoh to let His people go. He has everything in the universe at His disposal.

What God does with nations and civilizations, He does with individual persons, as well. You cannot run from His rule. You cannot hide. You can pretend He does not exist. You can forget Him in your daily living. But that does not erase Him from existence or remove His sovereign control over history, including your own history.

What had happened to exiles was nothing short of disaster. Their homeland had fallen, smashed to ruins. Young and old slaughtered in the streets. They had lost everything. Now refugees in a pagan land. Life as they had known it was over.

Among those carted off as captives to Babylon was Daniel, only 17, to be trained in Babylonian ways. But soon it will become clear that Daniel is not merely a victim. He's on mission for God. In a land of idols, faithful ones like Daniel testified to the reality of the

true God who is Lord of the nations. In a time of disaster and captivity, they displayed God's loyalty to His people. Daniel was exactly where he was supposed to be. And so are you.

Don't assume that if your life is hard at present or threatening in some way, that God has forgotten you or somehow made a mistake in putting you where you are. He rules. Whatever you might wish were different in your life, embrace the truth that God controls your path and shapes your destiny for good.

Lean into that reality. Find rest for your soul. Stop fighting. Stop pretending God has nothing to do with the course of your life and your circumstances. Don't waste your strength kicking against what He has ordained for you. He is with you all the days even to the consummation of the age.

Sarah Groves and Ellie Holcolmb, "This Cup"

*How many hours have I spent
Watching this shining tv
Living adventure in proxy
In another person's dream
How many miles have I traveled
Looking at far away lights
Listening for trains in the distance
In some brilliant other life?*

*This cup, this cup
I wanna drink it up
To be right here in the middle of it
Right here, right here
This challenging reality
Is better than fear or fantasy*

Philippians 2:14-15

¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or disputing, ¹⁵ that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

Part of your current circumstances may have roots in your own sins and failures. That was the case with the Jews. Their captivity was from the hand of God to bring them to repentance. It was for their good. And even at a time a judgment, God had work for those who would listen to Him. The same is true for you.

2. Grow where He has put you (5-6).

⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their 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.

These are all the normal responsibilities of living life here on earth wherever you are. Although the Jews were taken captive, hardly any of them were prisoners or slaves. Instead they were sojourners. Living in a foreign land unable to return to their own country for the time being, but able to set up living where they were.

The false prophets were declaring that God has going to send His people back to Jerusalem within two years. Of course, they had also predicted Nebuchadnezzar would fail to take Jerusalem. They were preaching what people wanted to hear. But they were lying when they said the Lord has promised these things.

Jeremiah revealed to them from the Lord that God had decreed 70 years in Babylon for them, one year for every Sabbatical year they had skipped over 490 years in the promised land. Whoever believed God would live accordingly.

Serving God includes the normal responsibilities of life. Planting gardens. Eating the produce. Rearing a family. Marrying off your kids. These are God-appointed tasks that are part of normal human existence. Don't belittle their significance. Work is good. Productivity is good. Training up kids is good. Marriage and

family is good. All of these normal rhythms not only serve your own needs so that you're not a parasite on other people, but also impact the community around you.

After three waves of captives taken to Babylon, there were only 4,600 in all taken there. Were the Jews to die out what of the promised Messiah, of whom Daniel himself would write. The line must continue. They were to increase not decrease there, just as they had done in Egypt centuries before when just over 70 children of Israel grew into a vast nation. The children born were a gift not just to ancient world but to ours—through the Messiah yet to be born Savior of the world.

Paul declared to the Thessalonians that a person who doesn't work should not eat. God has linked our work with our survival on purpose. It is part of our dignity as human beings made in His image. We are to subdue the earth, to harness its resources, to manage it well, to exercise dominion over the land and water and air, along with the plants and animals in it.

No matter your age, what are you doing with the resources you have? What are you doing to be productive? Why would you waste your life with worthless pursuits, wishing your life away?

Grow where God has planted you. Thrive there! Make the most of it! Whatever your age, whatever your social or economic status, wherever you live, in Greenville or Beijing or Tokyo or Istanbul or Madrid or Heidelberg or Pickens. We all are called to grow where God has put us for however long He has us there. There's work to do for His glory and for the good of others and ourselves no matter what mayhem is going on in the world.

3. Seek the good of the city where you are (7).

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.

Welfare—shalom; peace, prosperity, provision—all as it should be

The city—Babylon, of all places! The people who crushed their own country. Took hatchets to the palace and temple. Stole all the treasures and burned it with fire. Slaughtered King Zedekiah's sons in front of him and then put out his eyes. Barbaric pagans.

How do you seek the welfare of a people your hate because they have destroyed your people and your land? Whatever the political polarization of our times, the outrage we

might feel could hardly compare to what these Jews were feeling at the time.

But when they remembered that it was God who had made them captives, not just Babylon. That their suffering was necessary because of their sins against Him. That He was still looking out for them. That perspective changes everything.

My survival, my wellbeing is in God's hands. What can man do to me? Remembering that frees me to be kind even to my enemies. I don't have to scrap and fight for my survival and safety. God is with me.

Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you

What would that actually look like?

Titus 3:1-4, 8, 14

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, ² to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people. ³ For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. ⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared,

8 The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

14 And let our people learn to devote themselves to good works, so as to help cases of urgent need, and not be unfruitful.

Pray to the Lord on its behalf.

Even though the Babylonians were their political enemies!

Matthew 5:43-45

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

1 Timothy 2:1-4

1 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, **2** for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. **3** This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, **4** who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

These are verses that resulted in our praying each Sunday morning for gospel-preaching churches in our area, for a person in government, and for a nation in the world along with our gospel partners there.

And because of passages like this one in Jeremiah 29, we have begun to pray periodically on Sunday evenings for the wellbeing of our city and community.

For in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Your own welfare (shalom) is connected to the welfare of the place you are.

If the Jews were to pray for Babylon, the city that had conquered their country and taken them captive, how much easier should it be for us to pray for Greenville, for South Carolina, for the United States, where we enjoy so much freedom and benefit from so many blessings?

Are you regularly praying for the city where you live?

Are you bending your efforts to promote its prosperity and peace?

In what practical ways are you doing so?

Where are the areas of urgent need?

The overturning of Roe v. Wade merely devolved the question of saving unborn

children and serving the needs of their mothers to the states. It means there is even more work to be done for the good of the people where we live. The battle must be won in the hearts of men and women, not just in the courts.

Where are the statesmen like Daniel, spending their lives to do good to their employers, their city, their nation, unbelievers and believers?

Think about the faithfulness and respect, compassion and care Daniel showed toward Nebuchadnezzar while at the same time maintaining devotion to God and frank honesty regarding areas Nebuchadnezzar needed to repent of (Daniel 4). Think of all the good he did for this pagan king of Babylon as well as for the city and for his own people the Jews.

Why should we not interact with city and state leaders in the same way? With whom are we building relationships who have leadership responsibilities that touch the lives of many people in our community? Why wait till only election years when polarization and slander run high to show care for our community and its leaders? It's almost the worst time imaginable to build genuine relationships and exercise influence for good.

4. Count on the promises of God (8-11).

8 For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your 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, declares the LORD. **10** For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. **11** For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

God has determined shalom for us. Our hope is secure. There's no need to fear whatever happens in the short term. We are free to seek the shalom of others because God has already secured shalom for us.

Titus 2:11-14

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, **12** training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, **13** waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, **14** who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

God had promised judgment. Many scoffed at His words, ignored them, and refused to believe. But it came just as God had said it would. Likewise, God promised the Jews He would return them to Jerusalem in His purposed time. The promise would not fail. He will welcome us to our homeland at the proper time as well. And He's with us all the days till then.

Trusting God to bring you home in His time frees you to serve the good of the people where you are while you are away from home. Fretfulness and fear paralyze action for good where you are.

Know this, you ignore God's Word to your own harm, no matter who you are. Pagan nations are accountable to Him, as was Israel. Nebuchadnezzar had to answer to Him, as will you.

5. Seek the Lord with all your heart (12-14).

¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

This was God's ultimate goal. It is His goal in all of human history. The big story. The good news. He's calling out a people for His name.

Want to bring some heaven to earth? Walk with God. Seek His face. Stop turning your own way. Let Him shepherd you in the paths of righteousness for His name sake. His goodness and steadfast love will pursue you all the days of your life. And then—and then, you get to take up residence in the house of the Lord forever.

Jeremiah 24:4-5

⁴ Then the word of the LORD came to me:

⁵ "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans.

⁶ I will set my eyes on them for 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 pluck them up. ⁷ I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart.

These people were in contrast to the bad figs—those who resisted God's plan and were rebels to serving Him within the context of the difficulties He had assigned for them.

Where is your heart this morning?
Give God your heart! Even the hard things He
designs to turn you back to Him.
Proverbs 3:5-7

Conclusion

At the center of human history is a cross where God proved His love for us is so great He is willing to die in our place to purge us from our sin. History is His story—the Hero of that story is Jesus the Messiah, our Savior. Will you not trust Him? What or who could be more reliable than your Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer?
In Him alone you have a future and a hope.

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Song: 10,000 Reasons

Discussion Questions

1. What are some ways you feel the tension between your citizenship in heaven and your citizenship on earth?
2. Why was it so important for the Jews to recognize that God had sent them into

exile versus their just being victims of world events?

3. How does God's sovereignty over all history, including our own personal histories, make our "challenging reality . . . better than fear or fantasy" (Sarah Groves and Ellie Holcomb, "This Cup")?
4. In what ways do you think fulfilling the normal responsibilities of life (like planting gardens and eating the produce, rearing a family, marrying off your kids) honors God and impacts humanity for good?
5. Why is neglecting such normal duties of work and family harmful and sinful?
6. What are some practical ways you could promote the wellbeing (shalom) of the people and community around you?
7. What are some important prayer requests you could pray for your city and beyond?
8. In what ways does counting God to be faithful to His promises free you to do good even to your enemies?
9. What are some practical ways to seek God with all your heart?