

What to do when you live in Exile \* Jeremiah 29  
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Years ago, I was asked by a seniors' group to lead a 'bluegrass worship night,' and they absolutely insisted that I play 'This world is not my home; I'm just a passin' through.' Do you know that song?

*This world is not my home I'm just a passing through  
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue*

Now that's true. As followers of Jesus, this world IS NOT our home. We ARE just passing through. But that raises an interesting question. Because we're not just 'passing through' – we've all got seventy-eighty-ninety if you grew up drinking Langford water – years to live. So what do we do when we've living in a world that is not our home?

That was a question that the people of Israel in Exile had to wrestle with. They'd been torn from their homes by a foreign power, relocated to a foreign land and now they're stuck there wanting for all the world to get back home again. What do you do in that situation? Resist the people who carried you into Exile? Keep your stuff packed in the hopes that you'll be headed home sooner than later? Give up and just blend into the culture around you?

These are questions that we need to ask too. We are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, living in Exile here on Earth; how do we relate to the culture around us? Do we resist it at every turn? Blindly comply and fit right in? Become so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good? What do we do? How do we live as the people of God when we are truly far from home?

Jeremiah answers that question in the passage of Scripture that we're going to look at today. Turn with me in your Bibles to Jeremiah 29 – Jeremiah 29 is really a neat chapter. It's actually a letter that Jeremiah wrote to the people of Israel in Exile. He was still in Jerusalem at that point – apparently they had pretty good UPS service back then – and he got this letter to them and it got preserved in the Bible. You can see in Jeremiah 29:1 –

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. (Jer 29:1 NIV).

So here's this letter; what does it say? Verse 4:

4 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: (Jer 29:4 NIV).

So here's God's word – what to do when you live in Exile – and it's neat – because if you look at verse 7 and verse 13, you're going to see the same word. Do you see it there? Verse 7 and verse 13 use the same word – 'seek.' Seek the well-being of the land of your Exile and Seek the LORD with all your heart. There you have it – there's how to live in Exile – seek the well-being of the land of your Exile and seek the Lord with all your heart.

Let's unpack that, one at a time. Look at verse 4 again –

4 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

5 "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

6 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.

Some of the exiles were really resistant to the idea that they might be stuck there in Babylon. And we see from verses 8 and 9 that there were actually prophets telling them to keep their bags packed because they'd be headed home any time now. But Jeremiah writes from Jerusalem to say – 'don't listen to them. I've heard from the LORD and He's said it's going to be seventy years (v. 10) – so you might as well settle in. Build houses, plant gardens, put down roots. Settle down in the place where you are living because you're going to be there for a while. And don't just settle down – verse 7 -

7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. (Literally, seek the 'shalom' of the city – like the holistic, all-encompassing well-being of the city). Do all you can do to make the city the best that it can be.

God is saying here 'while you're living in Exile, don't just look out for your own thing, but seek the health and wellbeing of the culture you live in.' Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. Invest in it. Work for its benefit. Do all you can to make it a better place. And then verse 7 concludes - Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

That's interesting, because sometimes exiles have an antagonistic attitude towards the people in charge, but God says here to pray for them! If there is peace and prosperity in our society then we should experience peace and prosperity, too. And so God says – 'build houses, plant gardens, intercede for your society – seek the well-being of the land of your exile.'

That's the first thing to seek but there's a second thing isn't there? What do you do when you live in Exile? 1. Seek the wellbeing of the place where you are. And 2. Seek the Lord with all your heart.

You can see that in verse 11 – a very famous verse –

(Put down roots...) 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 hope and a future.

12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to 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 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" (Jer 29:11-14 NIV).

This is really important I think for the people of Israel in Exile to hear. A lot of them are probably thinking – why would God let this terrible thing happen to us? Has He abandoned us? Is He trying to destroy us? The Exile is the greatest trial of their generation and some of them are probably thinking 'Why is God doing this to us?'

And then along comes Jeremiah's letter – the Word of the Lord – and in it, God says – 'Hold on. I know what I'm doing. My plans here are not to harm you. My plans are not to destroy you. You got yourself here by ignoring me, but my plan is ultimately to prosper you, to refine you, to see you thrive as my

children. God says - I am going to bring you back from captivity; I'm going to bring you home. Four times between vs. 10-14 God says – I WILL bring you home; I am giving you a future and a hope. So don't lose heart, but DO seek me with all of your heart.'

As important as it is to seek the wellbeing of the world around us, it's also possible to become so much like it that we forget about God. I mean, Israel knew that all too well; they were IN EXILE because they had sought after the Lord only half-heartedly. And so God says here – listen – my plans are not to harm you but to see you thrive. I am preparing for you a future and it is good. So don't lose hope. And do seek Me with all Your heart. Not half-heartedly like you did before, but whole-heartedly. Make Me the centre of your life. Spend time in prayer. Spend time in my Word. Spend time with the community of believers building one another up. Knowing that my plans are always for good, seek me with all of your heart.'

That was God's message to the people of Israel and that's God's message to us, too. Knowing that God is always working for good, seek the wellbeing of the land that you live in and seek the Lord with all your heart.

In Exile, it might be easy to think that God has abandoned us, but listen, the presence of trouble does not mean the absence of God. I remember the very first time I heard Jeremiah 29:11 – I was going through a hard time and this French Canadian girl and her husband said to me – you know what – 'God knows what He's doing; His plans are not to harm you but to prosper you, to give you a future and a hope' and I think that really was consistent with the way the Jeremiah 29:11 plays in Jeremiah's letter.

If things are tough, you can know that God is not trying to harm you. He's not wicked and capricious like that; He is gracious and compassionate and is probably refining you for the next leg of the journey. In God, you have a future and a hope. (A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out – Matthew 12:20). He will preserve us and give us a future and a hope.

And if there's one thing that we do need to hear from this passage, it's that 'God's plans to prosper us and not to harm us' are not always right away. God is giving us a hope and a future. It may take a while; it may not even be as soon as we like. For the people of Israel in Exile it was seventy years! But we can know without a shadow of a doubt that God is working for good.

And in the meantime, we seek the welfare of the land of our Exile and we seek the Lord with all our hearts.

You know, I think we've got that one down pat. You're serving the community you live in, serving on agricultural boards and library boards and jobs that really advance society. You're getting kids to school by cross walks and school buses. You're giving your time to serve marginalized people at Why Not and Friendship House. You're getting to know your neighbours and praying for them. You are seeking the welfare of the land in which you live and that's awesome.

And the way that this group has kept meeting faithfully through the pandemic shows that you are seeking the Lord with all your heart. Keep it up. It's certainly possible that in the interest of serving the world around you, you got so entangled in it that it chokes out your spiritual life. But that's why we seek the Lord with all our heart. The Message translation of Romans 12:2 puts it well - Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. 'Seek the LORD with all your heart.'

In the end, that song was right. This world is not our home, we're just a passin' through – that's our future that we're looking to and our hope – but while we're here – we will seek the wellbeing of the land and seek the Lord with all our heart, knowing that God is always working for good.