



Sunday School Lesson for July 29, 2007
Released on July 25, 2007

"Jeremiah Invited Captives in Babylon to Trust God"

Printed Text: Jeremiah 29:1-14

Background Scripture: Jeremiah 28, 29

Devotional Reading: Psalm 145:13b-21

Jeremiah 29:1-14

1 Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem unto the residue of the elders which were carried away captives, and to the priests, and to the prophets, and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon;

2 (After that Jeconiah the king, and the queen, and the eunuchs, the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, and the carpenters, and the smiths, were departed from Jerusalem;)

3 By the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, (whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent unto Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon) saying,

4 Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon;

5 Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them;

6 Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished.

7 And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace.

8 For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Let not your prophets and your diviners, that be in the midst of you, deceive you, neither hearken to your dreams which ye cause to be dreamed.

9 For they prophesy falsely unto you in my name: I have not sent them, saith the Lord.

10 For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.

11 For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

12 Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you.

13 And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

14 And I will be found of you, saith the Lord: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the Lord; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Outline Jeremiah's letter to the captives.
2. Outline a letter that a modern Jeremiah could write to people of his own society.
3. Suggest one or two ways that he or she can seek the Lord more wholeheartedly on a daily basis.

Introduction - Desperate Living

I saw her again the other day. She was in the frozen-food section at the supermarket. This time she was tall and very thin. She had dark hair and a light complexion. At first I thought her face was dirty. Then I realized that even her heavy makeup could not hide the bruises. Her eyes were downcast, her expression blank.

But our eyes met for just an instant as our shopping carts passed, and I was stunned by her look of fear and pain. Who had beaten her? Boyfriend? Husband? Father? I realized that I had seen her too many times. Sometimes she had been short and blond. Other times her skin had been dark. She was the woman betrayed by a man who should have protected her, and she saw no way out of her wretched situation. She finished her shopping and returned to her world of horror.

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) wrote, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” This is still true. We drag ourselves through each day, overwhelmed by commitments, bills, and worries. We live vicariously through pop celebrities, sports heroes, or other media creations. When we are asked how we are doing, we automatically say, “Fine.” But we aren’t “fine.” In our heart of hearts, many of us have given up hope and see nothing in the future but playing out a life of drudgery.

This is not what God intends for us, though. God wants us to be people of hope, not fear. God created us to live with confident assurance, not daily desperation and aimless distraction. Today’s lesson gives a clear view of the irrefutable fact that God intends the very best for His people. He asks that we trust Him and obey Him. He will give us full, rich lives.

Lesson Background

Judah was not taken captive by Babylon in a single invasion but rather over a period of time in three separate invasions: in 605, 597, and 586 B.C. During the third invasion, the complete destruction of Jerusalem and the temple took place.

So important is this event in the history of Israel that it is recorded three times in Scripture (2 Kings 25; 2 Chron. 36; Jer. 52). It reminds us that even God's chosen people cannot disobey God and get away with it.

We saw in last week's text that Jeremiah ministered during the rule of several kings, continuing right up to the time of the Captivity. In this week's text, Jeremiah is recorded as writing a letter to those already in captivity. This should probably be dated, therefore, right around the 597 B.C. invasion. There were those who were telling the captives that their time in Babylon was going to be brief, which was not so.

A Letter (Jeremiah 29:1-4)

1. Who had been taken captive and became recipients of Jeremiah’s letter? (v. 1)

Jeremiah wrote a letter to the elders, priests, prophets, and common people who had been carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon.

If you were to travel straight across the desert from *Jerusalem* to ancient *Babylon*, the distance would be about 500 miles. But following the northern route, through the Babylonian administrative center of Riblah and down the Euphrates River valley, would make the distance more like 880 miles. This is a well-traveled road in Jeremiah's day, and it takes six to eight weeks to make the journey.

Note that Jeremiah addressed "the residue of the elders," along with the others. Apparently this points to the fact that some of the older people had already died in Babylon; so Jeremiah was addressing those who were still alive.

As we see in verse 2, quite a number of significant people besides the king and queen mother had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar on that occasion. Eunuchs were servants who sometimes served as officers. Princes were those with various types of status, including captains, chiefs, governors, and other rulers. Carpenters were those skilled workmen who could also have been masons and engravers. Smiths today are usually metalworkers, but these Old Testament smiths were probably artisans of a broader nature than that. To all of these Jeremiah had an important message.

2. Why did Jeremiah write this letter?

The previous lessons discussed God's warning towards Judah. The Lord wanted the nation to repent from all their sins and return to Him. He wanted the people to change their hearts so that they could truly serve Him. God promised judgment towards the nation if it refused to obey Him. Sadly, the nation remained in its sins, and now, God's judgment is upon them. Now the nation is suffering the consequences for its actions.

No one should expect to continue sinning and not receive some sort of punishment from the Lord. Yes, he is "slow to anger" and "plenteous in mercy" (Psa. 103:8), but God will only be patient with people for so long. Eventually, He will bring judgment to those who continue to defy Him.

3. How was Jeremiah's letter taken to the captives? (v. 3)

King *Zedekiah* uses two emissaries to communicate with King *Nebuchadnezzar*. These men, *Elasah* and *Gemariah*, also serve the purpose of carrying Jeremiah's letter to the proper recipients in exile. Jeremiah would not have been able to send his letter with these men without permission from King Zedekiah. The people in Jeremiah's target audience have been displaced. But he has not forgotten them.

4. What false message did Jeremiah seek to correct in this letter?

In chapter 28 of Jeremiah, the false prophet Hananiah prophesied that the Captivity would end in two years. Jeremiah wanted the people to understand that they were under the divine direction of God, and they needed to listen to his message.

"How to make the best of adversity. Jeremiah advises the captives in Babylon to take a course that is eminently brave and wise. The first inclination would be to stir up a useless revolt, the second to sit down in sullen despondency. When trouble overcomes us we are tempted to follow one or other of these courses—to rebel or to despair. Jeremiah teaches us, as he taught the Jews of his day, that neither is right. He indicates a better way.

Why dash our heads against the prison walls? The brain will suffer before the granite. The Jews could not successfully revolt against Babylon; to live on the eve of rebellion, as restless conspirators, would be dangerous and futile. The Captivity was ordained by God (verse 4). It was sent as a wholesome chastisement. To those who understood the teaching of the prophets on this point, rebellion was at once disobedience to God's will and the refusal of a useful corrective. We should remember this when we grow impatient under trouble, and learn to bow silently before the will of our King and our Father, to receive without complaining the discipline which is intended to cleanse and strengthen our spiritual life." (The Pulpit Commentary -Spence, H.D.M.)

A Message (Jeremiah 29:5-8)

5. What was God's first commandment to the people, and how did this correct the false message? (v. 5-6)

God's first message was for the people to settle in Babylon. Instead of praying to God for escape, they were to build houses, plant gardens, and continue to reproduce as a nation. God wanted the people to live on so that their descendants could be delivered after the sentence. Though God was punishing the people, He was still maintaining the covenant that He made to Abraham.

God never loses control of any situation. He will fulfill His plan for Judah (and for us), and no force can stop Him from doing so. Settle in and watch Him work in His time.

6. What was God's second commandment? Why should Judah do this? (v. 7-8)

God's second commandment was to seek peace with Babylon. They were to work and pray for the peace and prosperity of Babylon. After all, they will be a part of this nation for many years as captives. God set it up so that Judah's blessings will come from Babylon.

Once again we are reminded that God's ways are often not ours at all. Isaiah 55:8-9 puts it best: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your

ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." Christians must continually read God's word. We must grow in our understanding of Him and His ways, for we will never be fully knowledgeable while on earth.

It would be beneficial for the Jewish people of Babylon to be a place of peace and prosperity. They were not treated badly and were allowed great freedoms by their captors.

A special warning was given. The people were not to let the false prophets and diviners distract them from messages saying they would be going home soon. Diviners were those who conjured up plausible messages by means of magical practices. Both the false prophets and the diviners were deceptive, and if the people began to believe in them, they would encourage their practices. This is what Jeremiah meant when he said, "Neither hearken to your dreams which ye cause to be dreamed" (Jer. 29:8).

An Explanation (Jeremiah 29:9-14)

7. What timetable for going home did Jeremiah give the captives? (v. 10)

God promises that he will return to His people after seventy years is up. He wanted the people to understand that they will not be delivered any sooner. Anyone who said otherwise was a liar, and they were not to be trusted. They were to ignore these people.

This was not Jeremiah's first reference to the seventy year. In Jeremiah 25:8-12 he warned that this captivity was coming because of Judah's sinfulness. He told them that they would serve the king of Babylon for seventy years, after which God would punish Babylon for their evil. God's timing was set, and the people might as well accept it.

Often, the truth is not something that is pleasant to us. We all want to hear things that are positive. We want the reassurance that God will bless us no matter what. We don't want to hear how we are wrong. For the most part, we want to do our own thing. This month's lessons remind us that we are all accountable to God for our actions. He will bless us or punish us according to how we live our lives. We all need to listen to godly correction so that we can avoid needless suffering in our lives. This is not to say that we won't ever suffer if we are right with God, but we won't have to suffer for the wrong reasons.

8. What did God say about the thoughts He had towards Judah? (v. 11)

God is not a vindictive God determined to destroy those who refuses to listen to Him. He loves humanity, but he also has standards that must be met. Consequences follow when we fail to meet His standards. These consequences do not come without

warning as the Word is filled with instruction to let His people know exactly what is expected of them.

God reassured the people of Judah that His thoughts toward them were not thoughts of war, and evil. His thoughts were thoughts of peace, and His desire was that His people would someday enjoy themselves as they never had before. Judah's exile would actually lead them toward a time of peace and restoration. This was the "expected end" (Jer. 29:11) He spoke of through Jeremiah. While Judah had negative and depressing thoughts about their present circumstances, God was thinking ahead to the good He had in mind for them.

9. What promise did He include regarding their prayers to Him? (v. 12,13)

God promises that He will one day hear the prayers of His people. He will respond to their prayers. God would hear the prayers of His people as soon as their hearts were right with Him. Nehemiah provided an example of this. As soon as he heard of the bad conditions in Jerusalem, he prayed and God responded (Neh. 1-2).

Although God's ways are far above ours and He is so great, He delights to hear us when we "call upon" Him, and He will delight to answer our prayers when we seek Him with all our heart.

10. What do we know about the fulfillment of God's promise? (v. 14)

God's promise was for a return to their own land. Their captivity would be in the past as He led His people back from all the nations of the world to which He had driven them. This plan of God is still in place today.

God did return Judah from captivity after Persia conquered Babylon (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah). But there is a greater fulfillment of these words.

In the big picture of the Bible, Israel is to be restored for more than simply rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and its temple. Restored Israel is to be the nation that produces God's Messiah. This will bring "salvation unto the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

The nation of Israel, whether in exile or restored, is not an end unto itself. It is intended by God to be the vehicle that allows for His Messiah to come and restore humanity to Him. This is God's ultimate plan to give peace and well-being. The message of the New Testament is that we can be at peace with God through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).

Conclusion - Hardship and Hope

Reading Jeremiah allows us to take “the long view.” We can see beyond temporary adversity to a time of restoration and blessing. We can get through tragedy without doubting God’s love for us. We can pray to God in our times of need, knowing that He is listening and gives us hope.

The story of Jerusalem’s destruction is almost incomprehensible to us today. The survivors of this captivity wept uncontrollably when they arrived in Babylon (Psalm 137:1). Most of us have faced personal tragedy that left us feeling the same way. Think of a time when you endured great pain and sorrow. Maybe some are in this state now, this week.

In this dark night of the soul, it is easy to think that we will never be happy again. This is particularly true when misfortunes come at us in waves. Will this never stop? Why is this happening to me? What did I do wrong?

We should be careful not to see every bad thing in our lives as God’s punishment for sin. Bad things sometimes happen to good people because our world is full of sin, and this sin affects us directly and indirectly. We can, however, see that every tragedy will be followed eventually by God’s blessings and peace. We are, after all, children of the light (1 Thessalonians 5:5).

Even after the horrific events of Jerusalem’s destruction in 586 b.c., Jeremiah saw hope in the future (see Lamentations 3:21–24; written by Jeremiah). His hope was based on eternal promises. First, God’s compassion and mercy are inexhaustible; His fountain of blessings never runs dry. Second, God’s faithfulness is great and continually renewed. We can depend on God, for He never betrays our trust. This is our antidote for the sickness of hopelessness. These promises are ours too.

Prayer

God of hope, God of truth, we trust You with our futures. We trust You when our lives are challenging, for in You we have hope. May You give us the strength always to depend on You. We pray this in the name of Your instrument of hope and peace, Jesus Christ, amen.

Thought to Remember

When feeling defeated, look up!

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

Hope is something that keeps us going forward. In our lesson next week Jeremiah teaches us that we ought to have our hope in God. Study Lamentations 3:25–58.

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