

Prophets

Part 1, Jeremiah 29:1-14

A Letter to the Exiles

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. ² (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) ³ He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said:*

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. ⁷ Also, 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.” ⁸ Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹ They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD.*

¹⁰ *This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my good promise to bring you back to this place. 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 on 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.”*

Australians have a love of travel, more than most people in the world. In all the tourist destinations around the world you will find Aussies. In a hotel in Bangkok we bumped into a couple from Pennant Hills. In Mancora Peru we met two guys from Melbourne teaching English. In a hot spring in Banos' Equador we met a hippie from Byron Bay. Everywhere you go you will find Aussies on long journeys.

In traveling you really can learn a bit about yourself. This guy learnt that he was not alone in the world. This pic was taken when 2 complete strangers sat next to each other on a plane – they're not twins or brothers or related in any way – only to realise they had just met their doppelganger. It went viral on twitter and was great fodder for memes.

In this reading Israel is taking the biggest journey since leaving Egypt. The young and talented are taken from their nation of Israel into Babylon only to be told this trip will change their lives forever.

When I was in Sunday School, we would do a memory verse every week. If you remembered it you might get a lolly. I remember learning this great verse, a beautiful sentiment once:

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

But when I was in my early 20s I read the rest of the passage. God says this as he is about to send them into 70 years of exile – it changes the vibe of this passage. It's not just a nice motherhood statement BUT a parting reminder as they are about to head off to Babylon for good.

Israel has been disobedient to God for many years so God allows the Babylonians to come and sack Jerusalem, take off all the young and promising back to Babylon as exiles. This is Daniel's story, he is one of the young exiles, leaving Jerusalem. And as they go Jeremiah, an old well-to-do prophet, who remained in Jerusalem writes them this letter, giving them instructions of what to do, how to live in this new reality that they were facing.

And in this letter he delivers some very hard news in verse 10. All those leaving, will not see their homeland again. They are leaving on a journey that will not return in their lifetime. Only their children and grandchildren will once again see Jerusalem.

So what is his instruction for them in this new land in verses 5-7?

Not to fight against the powers that be, or pray for their destruction or resist becoming like the Babylonians. But to pray for them to live in this new world.

What Jeremiah is saying is that in your new land, rebellion against Babylon is disobedience to God. God is calling you to be his people in a foreign land, you don't need to be in Israel to worship him but no matter where you are, what situation you're in you can still be faithful to the Lord.

In the world today to all those that follow God are worshiping in exile. We don't live in a Christian world anymore, those days are long gone. Your average Aussie thinks it's weird to go to church to give your money and your time to God, to pray, read the Bible – these are all foreign customs in the land where we live.

But God says to the people be in the world, not of it. Marry, have kids, pray for the prosperity of the Land where you live (verse 7). Don't close yourself off, don't only live in your little Christian world.

In the monastic period, where they had monks and monasteries they were surrounded by a big wall, and the gates were shut. The world was outside, and they were inside cut off from everything going on. That's not what the Bible tells us to do.

It tells us to build houses, grow crops, and have children and grandchildren – to be in the world. But to do it with God at the centre, not the things of the world

Wherever God's people are, the message of hope travels with them. God gives them a hope to hold fast to. And for the Israelites this hope is not in having their homes returned to them; or having Israel re-established as a powerful nation; or having their fields, and livelihoods returned that they might prosper.

Your Hope is in me.... Not in the things of this world. Their hope is in him and in his promise, that there will be a life for them and that **one day** Israel will be restored.

A boy was badly burn in a fire. He was in hospital for many months, the treatment wasn't going so well, things were looking bleak. Worried about his schooling they found a teacher that would come in and help him on his English. When she came in she was shocked at how burnt he was. She taught a bit but wasn't sure if it would have made any difference. The next day when she returned a nurse said "what did you say to him yesterday?" The teacher had no idea what she was talking about and asked, "Is something wrong?" The nurse replied, "He has turned around, he is responding to the treatment, he's fighting, he wants to live."

Months later the teacher asked the boy, what changed? He said "I realised they wouldn't sent in a teacher to a dying boy."

Hope has real power in this world, hope in the future has its power in the present. The hope we hold tightly can greatly change how we feel, how we act, what we do. It can shape us and change us and in Christianity we have a hope that shapes who we are – we are a people of the resurrection and in Christ there is endless hope. Not hope, like 'I hope I win the lotto' but a hope in something we are certain of – a hope of assurance, hope that we are eternal beings.

What we are called into is something bigger than ourselves – called to be the very children of God and call out to God, Abba Father. A hope that all that is wrong with this world, the pain the loss will one day be made right. A hope that a God who is love, loves us unconditionally.

The Christian experience is often described as a journey. Jesus tells of it as two roads, a wide and a narrow. Paul describes it as a marathon, as a long race.

And on this journey in life there will be hardships, there will be discouragement. There will times of exhaustion and times of elation. But we are told even as Israel heads to Babylon that hope travels with us, when times are good, when times are tough – the hope we have in Christ will never leave us.

Do you carry that hope in your life? Do you let the hope of eternal life shape you in the present? Do you let the hope of unconditional love guide you on life's journey?