

# The Promise of Return (Jeremiah 29:1-32)



Listed below are the well-quoted verses from Jeremiah. Do we understand the context?

*'And you will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.'* (v13)

*'For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.'* (v11)

## A. Background

Babylon is now a growing empire with satellite cities dotted all over the Ancient Near East. Nebuchadnezzar's policy on the conquered land was to immediately take the top layer of the society in religion, politics and science, but leave the poor and uneducated people with no skill or leadership. He would then put over them a weak puppet king like Zedekiah, so that the entire nation could easily be controlled. This way the conquered people could not become a threat to Babylon.

By 597BC Nebuchadnezzar had already taken away 3,023 top citizens of Judah (c.f. 52:28). They were relocated to Babylon where they went through a re-education program, so that the best Jewish minds would be used for Babylon, not their own nation. These exiles were treated quite well, such as Daniel and his friends.

### Three Changes in Jeremiah 29

1. Jeremiah begins to write letters and books rather than speaking. Jeremiah 29 contains three parts:
  - (i) Word of Advice – Cooperate with Babylon (v1-9)
  - (ii) Word of Promise – Don't assimilate into Babylon (v10-15)
  - (iii) Word of Warning - Watch out for the False Prophets (v15-32)
2. Jeremiah's audience is no longer the residents of Jerusalem, but the Jewish exiles in Babylon possibly in Nippur close to Kabar Canal with the largest Jewish settlement. His letter was delivered by Elasah, Shaphan's son (26:24) and Gemariah, Hilkiyah's son (36:10-26; 2 Kgs 22:3-14) who were kind to Jeremiah. The recipients of Jeremiah's letter included the elders, priests, prophets, the queen mother (Nehushta), court officials (eunuchs), princes, craftsmen, and the smiths (engineers and scientists).
3. Jeremiah begins to speak of tremendous hope in the future. Why? What has changed? Previously Jeremiah's messages were mostly directed to the people in Judah, the 'bad figs.' Now he is addressing the people far away in Babylon and a people not yet born, the 'good figs' (c.f. Jer 24). Jeremiah writes books from Ch 30, and his words can now travel ~3000km and reach his future audience who will hear these words 70 years later and beyond. And Jeremiah's words are no longer so pessimistic but sing with hope. Through his writing, Jeremiah projects the prophetic words far into the 'distance' and 'time'.

Jeremiah is speaking to a whole new generation of Jews who will be born in Babylon and hear his prophecies in the future. God was starting new work with the remnants in the foreign land, who will seek God with all their hearts such as Daniel.

Jeremiah 29 was probably written around 594-596BC after the first Babylonian invasion in 598BC.

## B. Word of Advice - 'Cooperate with Babylon' (v4-9)

1. It was the Almighty God, Jeremiah reminds them, who caused them to be carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon. It was not Nebuchadnezzar, the devil or fate. It was the hand of God. (v4)
2. *'Build your houses and dwell in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters – that you may be increased there and not diminish. And seek the peace (welfare) of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace, you will have peace.'* (v5-7)

Pray for Nebuchadnezzar?! The natural human reaction under political subjugation is to 'resist', 'fight' and 'escape', to adopt the policy of non-cooperation. But Jeremiah urged them to 'cooperate' with Babylon and to 'submit under their rule', and even to 'seek Babylon's peace (welfare) because their own peace (welfare) depends on it.' This was not popular advice. Jesus was not popular because He refused to lead Israel into battle with swords and pitchforks. That's why the Jews chose Barabbas, a terrorist, over Jesus.

Jeremiah's advice for the Jews in exile to pray for Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar drew much fire from the false prophets. In Romans 13, Paul teaches, *'Submit to all authority and pray for those who rule over you.'* This was when Nero was the emperor of Rome.

3. Daniel followed Jeremiah's advice, and he became a powerful voice for the 'end-time revelation' in the pagan courts! Not in Jerusalem. Daniel was God's voice to many kings and empires. Queen Esther too 'cooperated' in the Persian Empire. Jeremiah advised the exiles not to listen to the 'false prophets' who were misleading them with wishful thinking. Jeremiah told them, 'You are not coming back until 70 years are fulfilled.' The Jews will be returning in the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation.

### C. Word of Promise - 'Don't Assimilate into Babylon' (v10-14)

1. Jeremiah prophesied, *even though you will be there for 70 years, but starting with the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation expect to come home. 'Cooperation' is not the same as 'Assimilation. Engage with the society as much as you can and live in the land and reap the benefit of blessings, but you are not to forget your homeland or your spiritual identity. Right now, stay and cooperate with Babylon, but you must expect to make your way back home one day.*

God says, 'I have plans for your peace (welfare).' God has His own plan for our welfare if we will align our lives with His plans.'

2. The 3<sup>rd</sup> generation exiles would have no living memory of the homeland. Why will this generation return when they will have no natural reason to do so? God Himself will cause them to return.

'I will' is repeated 6 times (v10-14) - *'I will visit you', 'I will listen to you', 'I will be found by you', 'I will bring you back', 'I will gather you', 'I will bring you to the place from which I caused you to be carried away'. God's 'I will' will be matched with 'our will.'*- *'You will call upon Me and pray to Me', 'And you will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.'* When the 'two wills' are in agreement, the most unusual movement takes place.

3. God promises, *'I will give you hope (for now in Babylon and in the future in Jerusalem) if you will give Me your heart.'* *If with all your heart you seek me then you will find Me (I will be gladly found by you), and then your future will be secure in Babylon or Jerusalem.*

Why were they not finding God previously in Judah? Because they were seeking God half-heartedly. They gave away their hearts to many things in this world. The keyword here is 'all your heart' (v13). If we find God, then our future is guaranteed.

4. Jeremiah was making the extraordinary promise that the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Jews will find God in Babylon where there is no temple, no priest, no sacrifices, no memory of the Jewish worship system that separated them from all other nations. They did not find God in the promised land with the law, the temple, the priest, the sacrifices. But in Babylon, there is no relic of their religion the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Jews will start to seek and search for God. This tells us something about God. He doesn't care about the external but our hearts. God wants to be found by those who may be least religious or knowledgeable, but seek Him with all their hearts! This was fulfilled exactly in the history of Jewish exiles (c.f. Dan 9; Ezra 9; Neh 9).

### D. Word of Warning - 'Watch Out for the False Prophets' (v15-32)

1. Avoid the half-baked false prophecies in Babylon, warns Jeremiah. God will judge those remaining in Jerusalem. They are the 'basket of bad figs' that cannot be eaten because Jerusalem was infected with false prophets and their false promises of blessing (v15-20 c.f. Jer 24). It was actually a blessing in disguise to an exile in Babylon. Many false prophets in Jerusalem were saying Babylon will fall within a year or two, so the people made up their minds not to hear Jeremiah's message of repentance. Their end was a

foregone conclusion. Now Jeremiah was warning the exiles in Babylon to watch out for the false prophets in their midst who were again promising an 'easy way out of trouble.'

- Jeremiah names three of them - Ahab the son of *Kolaiah (the voice of God)*, Zedekiah the son of *Maaseiah (the work of the Lord)*, and Shemaiah the *Nehelamite (Dreamer)*. They had impressive names, but they were false prophets preaching false hope – an easy way out. It was a lie that they would be in Babylon for only two years. They would be in Babylon for 70 years.

Jeremiah pronounces God's judgment on the two false prophets in Babylon. The Jews in Babylon will use the names of Ahab and Zedekiah to curse their enemies, *'The LORD makes you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire. They have committed adultery and spoken lies in My name. I am the one who knows, and I am a witness against their lies.'* (v22, c.f. *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego Dan 3:6*) What a way to be remembered!

- Shemaiah read Jeremiah's letter sent to the exiles in Babylon, and he wrote back to Zephaniah the priest in Jerusalem, saying *'God wants you promoted to the role of high priest over Jehoiada. You need to maintain order in the temple by putting away the demented self-proclaimed prophet Jeremiah into stocks at once!'* Thankfully, instead of promoting himself over Jehoiada and persecuting Jeremiah, Zephaniah read Shemaiah's letter to Jeremiah. Remember Zephaniah consulted Jeremiah twice for King Zedekiah? (21:1; 37:3) He knew Jeremiah was a true prophet of God. Later Zephaniah does become a high priest as second in charge (52:24). The lesson here is, do not promote yourself.

In Jeremiah's second letter to the exiles, God pronounces His judgement on Shemaiah and his descendants because he prophesied lies and deceived God's people in the name of the Lord. Remember God hates false prophets. He has prepared a special place for 'the false prophet' – the lake of fire.

## E. Application for Christians

- All Christians are strangers and exiles on the earth. When we become followers of Christ, we become sojourners on this planet, and we long to go home. We are to pray and seek the good of the nation in which we live because our own welfare depends on it. We are not to disengage from this world or retreat to a monastery but engage the world meaningfully and even reap some of the blessings of the land. We are to build houses, plant gardens, get married and have children, so that we can be the salt and light in this world as long as we are in it. We need Christian influence in science, arts, economy, education, politics, religion and media, etc.
- However, this world is not our home. Our first allegiance is not to this world, but to God as the citizens of His kingdom. We are root down so deeply in this world that we are reluctant to go home to heaven after 70-80 years of sojourning here. We ought to long for our home in heaven because we do not have an enduring city on earth. We are looking for a city whose Builder and Architect is God. That longing and motivation sets us apart and reveals where our hearts truly belong.
- We are like the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Jewish exiles in Babylon who have no natural memory of their homeland. Yet incredibly by God's grace, we yearn for our home in heaven. Who put that holy yearning in us? It is God's will that starts everything. Yet the will of God must have our will aligned with His. God desires to be found by people who seek and search for Him with all their hearts. If we 'find' God and God is 'found' by us, then our future will be secure. God is no respecter of religious tradition and privilege. God has a good plan for those who seek Him. But not for those who don't seek Him.
- Do we have false prophets in the church that we need to be cleansed of? We must be concerned about the prevalent preaching that promises an easy way out of the troubling times ahead.

The voice from heaven speaks to God's people in the last days, *'Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues,'* i.e. the Babylonian system. (*Rev 18:4; 2 Cor 6:17*)

Is the church out of the Babylonian system today? Is the Babylonian system gaining momentum significantly? Are we ready?