

Future Plans

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Prayer of Illumination

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept your Word.
Silence in us any voices but your own,
so that we may hear your Word and also obey,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Background

The prophet Jeremiah has many tools in his prophetic tool box to communicate the word of the Lord to his people. He's already used sermons, parables, symbolic acts, oracles, and rants (now called jeremiads in honor of the prophet). In our passage Jeremiah composes a letter and mails it to those in exile. In it he gives them two types of guidance:

- Guidance for the present.
- And guidance for the future.

Jeremiah doesn't sugar coat things. He boldly challenges false hopes and speaks the unpopular truth, saying: You will be in exile for a while—70 years in fact, as the Lord spoke. This didn't go well with the other prophets. But that didn't deter Jeremiah's message. And so, this was his guidance for the present:

"While you're in exile, adjust, adapt. Live life, don't just exist. Make the best of a bad situation. Bloom where you're planted. Settle down. Don't sit around and wait to be brought back home. God is with you in exile, too. So:

- Build a home away from home in Babylon...Buy, don't rent.
- Plant trees and eat what they produce.
- Marry and have children. When your children grow up, have them do the same.
- Seek the welfare of the city where I've sent you into exile.
- Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. If Babylon does well, you'll do well.

The word "welfare" in Hebrew is "shalom." Pray for the shalom, the peace of not just Jerusalem, but of Babylon, the city of your exile.

Praying and working for peace is prophetic, whether you're in Babylon or Birmingham. Making the best of your present doesn't negate your future. You can commit yourself to a place where you don't ultimately belong. You can grow both roots and wings. Despair believes the future will be the same as the present. But not hope. Hope is for the long-haul. Hope believes in a better future. Hope takes the long-view of things.

So, let's hear now God's plans for his people in the future.

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:10-14 (NRSV)

¹⁰ For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “Future Plans”

There’s an old “Twilight Zone” episode about a gangster who dies and, to his utter surprise, seems to wake up in paradise. He gets whatever he wants: unlimited women, money, power. At the snap of his finger, his desires are immediately gratified. There’s no struggle—all fun and no joy. But soon boredom sets in. He gets restless and frustrated. Finally, he brings it up to his guide. I don’t think I belong in heaven. I want to go to “the other place.” His guide responds, “This isn’t heaven; you’re already in the other place.”

One of my favorite books of 2021 is Paul Bloom’s *“The Sweet Spot: The Pleasures of Suffering and the Search for Meaning.”* In it he makes a convincing case that suffering adds meaning and pleasure to our lives. In other words, pain can lead to pleasure. Hoping for a life only filled with pleasure and ease will leave you empty—like the gangster in the “Twilight Zone.”

If you shovel snow in a blizzard, the hot bath that you take afterwards is going to be especially memorable. But the bath wouldn’t have been so memorable if you took the bath first, then shoveled the snow. Writer Zadie Smith likens the idea to the pain of childbirth and raising a child: It hurts as much as it is worth. Hurts a little—not worth much. Hurts a lot—worth a lot. We value what we’ve put blood, sweat, and tears into.

What’s that phrase, “No pain, no... gain.” There’s something about delayed gratification that’s rewarding. The anticipation of something better. The struggle and planning and work to get there. It helped Jesus: “For the joy set before him, Christ endured the cross.” Paul put it this way, “... *suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us ...*” (Rom. 5:3-5).

There can be pleasure in our suffering if we know it’s for a good cause. If we believe it’s maturing or bettering us. Or that it won’t be forever. We feel a deep sense of satisfaction when we’ve kept our composure and been courageous in the face of fear. If you see a purpose behind your suffering or a lesson to be learned, difficulty can be redemptive and endured. Suffering can actually make us stronger.

Our most memorable lessons are often the painful ones. And Israel’s exile was one of their toughest lessons yet. The people of Israel were forced migrants—they were brought to where they DIDN’T want to be. They never thought they’d be in Babylon—but here they were. Their false sense of confidence and security dashed. Away from home, away from the temple, they had to learn to reject false gods and give their entire devotion to God in a strange land. Exile happens today, too—literal and figurative. We can experience spiritual, emotional, and relational exile where we feel alone, separated from God, others, and even ourselves. We can feel stuck in places and seasons we didn’t choose to be in. The pandemic has been an exile for us as we await deliverance.

Whatever your literal or figurative exile, we have this hope. We are not lost or forgotten by God. Our history doesn’t have to be our destiny.

And this is where the good news comes in: After the "plucking up and tearing down" of exile, there will be the "planting and building" of homecoming. But it will come only after. Pain first, then pleasure. Exile, then Exodus. Crucifixion, then resurrection.

This is the rhythm of how God works, but we can get discouraged—in the waiting or in having false hopes:

- The false hope of expecting what God never promised.
- The false hope of refusing to believe what God has promised.
- The false hope that life is supposed to be easy.

Jeremiah's words are so meaningful because they're helpful correctives to these assumptions that can keep us in the valley of victimhood. Instead, we can face reality in the present while still keeping a new hope for the future.

"I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. Or as another translation says: *"I know the thoughts that I think toward you."* These future plans in the midst of present pain are not just for us individually, but as a people. As the church.

Think about it: The Creator of All, the God of the Universe, thinks about us, thinks about you. Our **All-Powerful and All-Present God is also All-Knowing**. God's knowing isn't just about the bad things we do. It's a heart knowledge. God considers us, remembers us, and keeps us in mind. He knows who we are and how we're wired. In fact, he knows us better than we know ourselves—and still loves us! God doesn't let us slip through the cracks or slip his mind.

There are interesting ways God's future plans are phrased in various Bible translations:

- "Plans for welfare and not for evil."
- "Plans to take care of you, not abandon you."
- "Plans for good and not for disaster."
- "Plans for well-being and not for trouble."

Trust involves believing God's promises for the future, even if we're not feeling it or seeing it. In other words, Jeremiah is helping us take the long-view of things. He helps us find the lesson and the purpose in our struggle and pain that help you to keep moving forward. When you're exiled in your own personal Babylon, when you're only in year 28 of 70 of captivity, remember God's words:

- I will take note of you.
- I will fulfill my promise of favor to you.
- I will bring you back. I'm not going to abandon you.
- I've got plans for you of shalom and not shame.
- When you call me and come and pray to me—I'll listen.
- You'll search for me and find me—if you only seek me wholeheartedly. Devotedly.

In other words, God is **findable, available, and accessible**. So don't give up or call off the search. Keep looking, keep crying out. God will help you discover his will and lay hold of his divine resources. Hope helps us carry on and hope carries us home.

Psychiatrist Victor Frankl in his classic *"Man's Search for Meaning"* tells of a bleak time that he and his fellow prisoners shared while they were held in a Nazi death camp. It was the sixth winter of the war. Frankl and his fellow prison mates were exhausted, emaciated, and huddled together in their hut. A prisoner the day before stole a bag of potatoes. The punishment was to either turn the man over or for the whole camp to starve for the day. All 2500 prisoners chose to fast.

That night their morale was low. On top of that, the electricity went out. One of the older prisoners gave an impromptu speech in the darkness of their hut. He shared that those of their ranks who had died over the last few days mainly did so because they gave up hope. He then asked Viktor Frankl to lead them in a group psychotherapy session to find new hope so they might survive. Viktor didn't feel like it—he was cold, hungry, and exhausted. But he knew what was being asked of him in that moment. Encouragement was more necessary than ever. He had to rise to the occasion.

He first mentioned the trivial comforts they enjoyed. They still had their bodies and their breath. All that they'd gone through could still be an asset for the future if they made it out alive.

Then he was realistic. He reminded them typhoid hadn't gone through their camp yet, they had maybe a 1 in 20 chance of survival. He didn't know what the future would hold, but he said that good things could still happen—even in the hell of their death camp.

Then he mentioned the past—and how its joys still shone in the darkness of the present. No power on earth could take away from any of them what they had experienced and endured. Any great thoughts or actions they had made in their lives were brought with them from the past into this very moment.

Then he told the prisoners in the dark, while hearing their sighs, that human life doesn't lose meaning. The infinite meaning of life holds within it the suffering and dying they were experiencing in that very moment.

Then Frankl challenged the men, "Don't lose hope. Keep courage. Your struggle does not detract from your life's meaning. Someone is looking upon us in our difficult hours right now—a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or God. They're praying and hoping that you will stand strong and suffer proudly. Your sacrifice and struggle is a spiritual one. Your life is not in vain. We must continue."

When the electricity went back on and the light bulbs flickered, he could see his fellow prisoners with tear-stained faces. They limped toward Viktor to embrace him. On April 27, 1945, Frankl's camp was freed. Three years later Israel was declared a state. Although he lost his wife and other

family members in concentration camps, Frankl continued his vocation as a psychiatrist in Vienna for another forty years.

Hope, living hope, knows that God is holding us and our future. Sometimes we're brought into the Promised Land this side of heaven, but our ultimate homecoming is in heaven, for all eternity. Either way, we have a future with hope. God will bring us all safely home.

Amen.

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