

"An Expected End"

Introduction. Henry David Thoreau 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 are not "fine." Many of us have given up hope and see nothing but a dreary future.

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 us to trust Him and obey Him, even when it does not go our way.

I. ***Communication In Captivity (Jeremiah 29:1-3)***

A. Judah is uprooted (vss. 1-2).

1. If you were to travel straight across the desert from Jerusalem to 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.
2. This is a well-traveled road in Jeremiah's day, and it takes 6-8 weeks to make the journey. In the period between Jerusalem's capture and its destruction, those left in the city seem to communicate regularly with their exiled brethren in Babylon.
3. Jeconiah was the son of Jehoiakim. His surrender of Jerusalem in 597 B.C. allowed Nebuchadnezzar to sack the city and loot the temple (cf. 2 Kings 24:11-15). This verse dates the passage we are studying between 597 and 586 B.C., during the reign of Zedekiah in Jerusalem. Daniel and Ezekiel, who are in Babylon, are among the possible recipients of this letter (cf. Daniel 9:2).

B. Judah is not forgotten (vs. 3).

1. Zedekiah uses two emissaries to communicate with Nebuchadnezzar. These men, Elasha and Gemariah, also serve the purpose of carrying Jeremiah's letter to the proper recipients in exile.
2. The people in Jeremiah's target audience have been displaced. But he has not forgotten them and their woes.

II. ***Waiting In Captivity (Jeremiah 29:4-9)***

A. Build lives while waiting (vss. 4-6).

1. The letter begins with two titles for God. First, He is the "Lord of hosts." Another way of saying this is Lord Sabaoth (cf. Romans

- 9:29), meaning "master of the hosts of heavenly armies." It is a strong affirmation of the power of God (1 Samuel 17:45).
2. Second, He is the "God of Israel." The capture of Jerusalem and exile of its leaders does not mean that God has ceased to be Israel's God. He is still in control and has actually caused the captivity according to His plan (Jeremiah 44:2, 7, 11).
 3. Even after tragedy, life goes on. After disaster, you must recover, pick up the pieces, and keep living. God is telling Israel not to wait for a quick solution and a return to Jerusalem. They needed to understand that they are there for many years, so they should make the best of it. God still cares for them. His will is that their lives improve ("be increased") and that they have opportunities to flourish (Hebrews 10:32-39).
- B. Seek peace while waiting (vs. 7).
1. "Peace" is a loaded term in the Old Testament. Coming from the word *shalom*, it means much more than simple absence of warfare. It has the added sense of prosperity and welfare.
 2. God's message for the exiles was that they should desire and pray for the peace and prosperity of their new community (Babylon), even though they have been brought there against their will. As Babylon prospers, so they will prosper. The Lord promises a blessing upon those who treasure and seek peace (Matthew 5:8; Hebrews 12:14; James 3:16-18).
- C. Reject deception while waiting (vss. 8-9).
1. There were prophets among the exiles who are telling them that freedom was just around the corner. Their dreams and longings were focused on going home. But the mighty God of Israel warned against this deception.
 2. The false prophet was a long-standing problem in the nation of Israel, for they contributed to circumstances leading to the capture of Jerusalem. The false prophets blamed the captivity in Babylon on the wrong reasons; they failed to pronounce that God was punishing Judah for its iniquity (Lamentations 2:14). Ezekiel sees the core problem when these prophets try to invoke the name of the Lord (Ezekiel 22:28).
 3. True prophets point out sin and call for repentance rather than tell people that prosperity is just around the corner (Jeremiah 6:13-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-4). We have plenty of people today who say that everyone will be saved, that death is an annihilation, a good moral life will save you, or that we are saved by faith only. All of these are untrue and will not stand scriptural investigation.

III. **Promised Freedom From Captivity (Jeremiah 29:10-14)**

A. Promise of return (vs. 10).

1. Jeremiah began with a promise of return to Jerusalem. This was a classic good news/bad news message. The good news? The exile would not last forever. The bad news? Most adults hearing this would not live to see it, for it will be two or three generations down the road.
2. The first group of exiles (including Daniel) was taken to Babylon when Nebuchadnezzar became the king, about 605 B.C. The Babylonian empire fell to Cyrus of Persia in 539 B.C. Cyrus served as God's "battle axe" to break the power of the Babylonians (Jeremiah 51:20). Cyrus granted permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. That return began in 536 B.C.

B. Promise of prosperity (vs. 11).

1. We should understand "thoughts" as future plans that God has for Israel. God plans that the exiles will see "peace" rather than new devastation. They will gain "an expected end," meaning the future for which they hope. They will return to the land of their inheritance, to their holy city. There they will rebuild the house of the Lord.
2. Although this promise was made to the exiles of Judah, it still has applications for us today. God's desires our prosperity (Psalm 128:1-2). Our Lord is not a vengeful, cruel God who delights in punishing us. He waits for our trust and obedience so that He may bless us with His bounty (cf. Genesis 41:39-43; Daniel 1:17-20).

C. Promise of accessibility (vss. 12-14a).

1. After the time of Jeremiah, Zechariah taught that God refused to hear the pleas of Israel because of their hard hearts (Zechariah 7:13). Israel's restoration involved more than temple reconstruction. It included a restored relationship with God, a time of renewed prayer and worship (Zephaniah 3:9).
2. To call upon the Lord is Bible language for calling for assistance in the time of need (Genesis 4:26; Acts 22:16; Romans 10:13; 2 Timothy 2:22). The psalmist taught that God was near to those who called upon Him, but only if they did so in truth (Psalm 145:18). Furthermore, God turns a deaf ear if we hold sin in our hearts (Psalm 66:18).

D. Promise of restoration (vs. 14b).

1. God ends this section by reminding the exiles of His sovereignty. It was God who scattered the Israelites, first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians (Jeremiah 50:17). It is only God, then, who can restore Israel (Jeremiah 27:22).

2. 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, who will come and restore humanity to Him. This will bring "salvation unto the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).
3. The message of the New Testament is one of salvation and restoration (Luke 19:9; Acts 3:19-21). Through the salvation and restoration found in Christ, we can be at peace with God (Romans 5:1; 8:6; 14:17).

Conclusion. We should be careful not to see every bad event in our lives as God's punishment. Sometimes events happen simply because our world is full of sin, and this sin affects us directly and indirectly. Even after the horrific events of Jerusalem's destruction in 586 B.C., Jeremiah saw hope in the future (Lamentations 3:21-24). 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.

The horror of Jerusalem's destruction is almost incomprehensible to us today. The survivors of this catastrophe 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.

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 (Colossians 1:5-6, 23, 27).