

The Letter to the Elders

Jeremiah 29

Jeremiah 29 - *“Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the remainder of the elders who were carried away captive—to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon. ² (This happened after Jeconiah the king, the queen mother, the eunuchs, the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.) ³ The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon, to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, saying,*

⁴ Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. ⁶ 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 diminished. ⁷ And seek the peace 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. ⁸ For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. ⁹ For they prophesy falsely to you in My name, but I have not sent them, says the Lord.

¹⁰ For thus says the Lord: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. ¹¹ 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. ¹² Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive. ¹⁵ Because you have said, “The Lord has raised up prophets for us in Babylon” -

¹⁶ therefore thus says the Lord concerning the king who sits on the throne of David, concerning all the people who dwell in this city, and concerning your brethren who have not gone out with you into captivity— ¹⁷ thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will send on them the sword, the famine, and the pestilence, and will make them like rotten figs that cannot be eaten, they are so bad. ¹⁸ And I will pursue them with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence; and I will deliver them to trouble among all the kingdoms of the earth—to be a curse, an astonishment, a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them, ¹⁹ because they have not heeded My words, says the Lord, which I sent to them by My servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them; neither would you heed, says the Lord. ²⁰ Therefore hear the word of the Lord, all you of the captivity, whom I have sent from Jerusalem to Babylon.”

Background Notes

In 597 BC, the second deportation of Jewish captives was taken from Judah to Babylon. This group included city elders, priests, prophets, officials, princes, craftsmen, smiths, the queen mother, and the king himself - King Jehoiachin (v1-2). Daniel had been taken in 605 BC, so he was already in Babylon. Ezekiel the prophet was taken in the second wave of captives (597 BC). Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem.

Soon after the second deportation, Jeremiah wrote a letter to the Jewish captives, encouraging them to try to live a normal life in Babylon. The Jewish false prophets (in both Jerusalem and Babylon) continued to falsely prophesy the same old lie: peace was right around the corner, and the captives would soon return to Judah, along with all the Temple treasures. Both Jeremiah (in Jerusalem) and Ezekiel (in Babylon) denounced these false prophets and their message in no uncertain terms. Some of the false prophets in Babylon were named: Zedekiah and Ahab (obviously not the kings of those same names). Jeremiah predicted that these two false prophets, who were also involved in immorality, would be taken by Nebuchadnezzar and burned alive.

Jeremiah 29:24-32 - *"You shall also speak to Shemaiah the Nehelamite, saying, ²⁵ Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, saying: You have sent letters in your name to all the people who are at Jerusalem, to Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah the priest, and to all the priests, saying, ²⁶ "The Lord has made you priest instead of Jehoiada the priest, so that there should be officers in the house of the Lord over every man who is demented and considers himself a prophet, that you should put him in prison and in the stocks. ²⁷ Now therefore, why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth who makes himself a prophet to you? ²⁸ For he has sent to us in Babylon, saying, 'This captivity is long; build houses and dwell in them, and plant gardens and eat their fruit.'"*

²⁹"Now Zephaniah the priest read this letter in the hearing of Jeremiah the prophet. ³⁰ Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying: ³¹ Send to all those in captivity, saying, Thus says the Lord concerning Shemaiah the Nehelamite: Because Shemaiah has prophesied to you, and I have not sent him, and he has caused you to trust in a lie— ³² therefore thus says the Lord: Behold, I will punish Shemaiah the Nehelamite and his family: he shall not have anyone to dwell among this people, nor shall he see the good that I will do for My people, says the Lord, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord."

Shemaiah was another false prophet in Babylon (v24-28). This false prophet had sent letters to the priests and people in Jerusalem, urging them to denounce and discipline Jeremiah for telling the exiles in Babylon to settle down and live normal lives. After Zephaniah read Shemaiah's letter to Jeremiah, Jeremiah wrote a second letter to the exiles, a letter that pronounced judgment on this false prophet, Shemaiah.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers should live as normal a life as possible in this world.

Jeremiah's letter was sent with two official couriers who were carrying official correspondence between King Zedekiah and Nebuchadnezzar (v3). Jeremiah's message to the people in Babylon was that they should live as normal a life as possible while they were in captivity: build your houses, plant your gardens, marry and raise families. And don't believe the false prophets who say that the captivity will soon be over. No! The captivity will last for 70 years, so get used to it.

After 70 years, however, the Lord promised the people: 'My good plans for you are to bring you back to your Land, and give you a future. In fact, in the *far* future you will seek Me wholeheartedly, and you will find Me. I will bring you back to the land of Israel from all the nations where you've been scattered, and I will restore your fortunes. But in the meantime, live as normal a life as possible.'

History has shown that throughout their many long centuries of worldwide dispersion, the Jewish people have followed this general pattern. They have identified with their country of residence, and they have lived as normal a life as possible - but always with the hope of "next year in Jerusalem"!

In view of the rest of Scripture, there's an application here for Christians: Believers should live as normal a life as possible in this world. 1 Timothy 2:2 says that we should pray to be able to lead a quiet and peaceable life, in all godliness and reverence. And Romans 12:18 says, "*If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.*" We know there will be persecutions and tests of our faith and disruptions in life, but still our aim as believers should be to live as normal lives as possible in this world.

2. Believers should pray as much as possible for the rulers of this world.

"And seek the peace 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." (v7).

The captives in Babylon were to pray to the Lord for the welfare of Babylon - and this would have included praying for Nebuchadnezzar and other government officials. The welfare of the Jewish exiles depended on the welfare of Babylon. The same is true today. 1 Timothy 2:1-4 says, "*Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men; for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*"

When was the last time you prayed for the rulers of Russia and Iran and Syria? And we should not only pray for the major world leaders – we should pray for our state and local officials as well. We are to pray for **all** who are in authority!

Certainly the prayers of the godly Jewish people in Babylon were a factor in the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4). And the Lord can answer our prayers for rulers today. Remember: “*The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord. Like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes*” (Proverbs 21:1).

Believers should pray as much as possible for the rulers of this world.

Practical Application

Be careful how you apply Jeremiah 29:11!

“*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.*” Some translations say, “I have good plans for you, says the Lord.”

Isn’t that a great promise? Many greeting cards and devotional booklets use this verse as a promise for a prosperous and successful future. It has almost become a “good luck verse”! Is that God’s promise to you? Does this verse promise that you’ll be healthy and wealthy all of your days? No! If you think that’s the point, you’re pulling this verse **way** out of its context!

Look at the context (the verses that surround this verse)! *This promise was made to the Jewish exiles in Babylon.* At the time, they were in exile as part of God’s discipline for their sins of disobedience and idolatry, but God’s plan for their future was for peace and welfare, not for calamity. His good plan for the future was to bring them back from their exile in Babylon and to restore them to their Land. That is the *proper interpretation* of this verse.

Although there is only **one proper interpretation** for any Scripture, there may be a number of **applications** of the truth it teaches. To find a *proper application* of this promise for today, we should look for a more parallel situation. For example, here’s an appropriate *application* to draw from this verse: if you’re in a discouraging situation, or even under God’s heavy hand of discipline, don’t despair. God still loves you, and He has His own good plans for your future! Romans 8:28 confirms this application: “*In all things God works for the good of those who love Him...*”

But notice – God’s “good plans” for you do not necessarily mean that you’ll have perfect health, or a better job, or more vacation time! No! Romans 8:29 reveals that His good and perfect plan for each one of us is to become more like His dear Son, Jesus Christ: “*...to be conformed to the image of His Son...*”

So be careful how you apply Jeremiah 29:11!