

Jeremiah: Shaped by the Potter's Hand
Kenwood Baptist Church Fall Sermon Series
Pastor David Palmer
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TEXT: Jeremiah 29:1-14



Good morning, Beloved. It is axiomatic for Christian faith to believe that God's plans for us are good. This belief rests on a set of assumptions that God is trustworthy, that God is powerful, that God is good, that He exercises His power toward us with reliable faithfulness, and that His plans for us are good. We just heard a recognized and often quoted verse of Scripture, Jeremiah 29:11:

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

This verse is often quoted at times of special celebration and marking milestones. Its importance is reflected in other translations. The NIV translation has a slight variation:

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you."

The Hebrew text of Jeremiah 29:11 reads:

"I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for shalom and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."

These words are precious to the life of faith. They are a promise that is rightly applied to significant moments in our lives. These words are true. They are reliable. They are utterly trustworthy because they come forth from a God who is trustworthy, powerful, and good.

This morning, I want us to take a journey to discover the occasion where these words are first delivered. We will find that they occur within a pastoral letter that Jeremiah sends. It's a letter that he sends to a people who have been displaced, their world turned upside down. They are exiled. This letter provides words of comfort, of hope, of confidence in God in the midst of tremendous upheaval, disruption, and personal trauma. And if God is trustworthy in those circumstances, He is trustworthy in all.

These words are written as part of a climactic public confrontation between false prophets and true prophets. It's a dramatic contest that takes place in Jeremiah 25 and 29. It's a crucial part of the Old Testament storyline. It provides scaffolding for us to construct an unshakable faith in the Lord. This part of the story of the Bible leads us to find that our faith in God is unshakable. This portion of the Bible is part of our family history that we all must know. I want you to know this story. I want this story to be woven into your hearts so that you can trust God in any and all circumstances that you will face. Do not worry if you miss a detail or two. I want you to see the big picture of these chapters because what we read in chapter 29 is the culmination of the story that starts back in chapter 25.

For those of you who like to have a little road map of where we are going, this is where we are going:

Overview of Jeremiah 25-29

Jeremiah 25 – Jeremiah's message - exile will last 70 years

Jeremiah 26 – Jeremiah accused of treason

Jeremiah 27 – Jeremiah's true prophecy

Jeremiah 28 – Hananiah's false prophecy

Jeremiah 29 – Jeremiah's letter to the exiles

In Jeremiah 25, Jeremiah's message to his hearers is that God will be taking us into exile and that will last for 70 years, three generations. In Jeremiah 26, the response to this announcement is that Jeremiah is accused of treason. "That's a terrible message," his hearers said. "Not true. Deserving of death." In Jeremiah 27, Jeremiah enacts this prophetic word before the eyes of his hearers in a prophetic sign act. In Jeremiah 28, Jeremiah is confronted publicly by another prophet named Hananiah, who proves to be a false prophet. And then we encounter the letter, chapter 29.

These chapters take place over an extended period of time:

Key dates in Jeremiah 25-29

Jer 25 – 605 BC (4th year of Jehoiakim, 1st year of Nebuchadnezzar)

1st wave of exiles including Daniel

Jer 27 – 593 BC (4th year of Zedekiah)

2nd wave of exiles including the king and officials

Jer 29 – Jeremiah's letter to the exiles

Jeremiah 25 is set in the year 605 BC. It's the first year of the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar. It's the moment when Daniel and his companions are sent off into exile. It's the fourth year of King Jehoiakim. Jeremiah 27 takes place 12 years later in 593 BC, the fourth year of Zedekiah, a new king. It's also the year of the second wave of exiles, including the king, the queen, and the officials. And then, in Jeremiah 29, Jeremiah's letter is sent.

Let's journey through these chapters. It's a stirring public announcement of God's purposes. In Jeremiah 25, Jeremiah receives a word from God. In Jeremiah 25:1-3, we read:

"The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah (that was the first year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon), which Jeremiah the prophet spoke to all the people of Judah and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem: 'For twenty-three years, from the thirteenth year of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, to this day, the word of the LORD has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened [shema].'"

It's a word that summarizes his prophetic ministry that he tells us he has been proclaiming faithfully for 23 years. This number is really meaningful to me because it's almost the length of my entire public service as a pastor and all the years of serving Christ. Jeremiah says he has been serving Christ for 23 years. *"For 23 years,"* he says, *"the word of the Lord has come to me."* He has spoken it to his generation, but they have not listened. They have not *"shema-ed"* God's word, and now the Lord announces that the time is up. The Lord says, *"I will send for the all the tribes of the north."* *"I am sending for Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. He will come against the land,"* and *"I will devote the land to destruction."* God uses the very language that He had used earlier of the Canaanites. Now, He applies it to His own rebellious people. It's a word of divine discipline.

He calls Nebuchadnezzar *"My servant,"* which is an astonishing phrase. To the hearers, Nebuchadnezzar is like the archenemy of God's people. He is the king of Babylon. We have only one picture of Nebuchadnezzar from the ancient world. It's from a private art collection, the Schoyen collection. It's a monumental stele that depicts Nebuchadnezzar with the equipment of a builder in his hand. There is the king depicted, and there is the layout of his monumental

ziggurat that he would construct in Babylon. Babylon was the largest city of the world at the time. It was called Babylon because it was a city where the gods



of the nations were welcomed.



Bab-ilim means the gate of the gods.

God says that Nebuchadnezzar is *“My servant.”* This is startling, but it means that the Lord God Almighty is free to use anyone He chooses. The Lord says through Jeremiah that the land— that is, the land of Israel—will become a ruin and a waste, and the Israelites will serve the king of Babylon for 70 years. In Jeremiah 25:11, we read:

“This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.”

Continuing in Jeremiah 25:12, we read:

“Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity,’ declares the LORD, ‘making the land an everlasting waste.’”

When we feel that temptation to say, “What about Babylon’s sins?” God says, “Oh, I know about those.” But He announces a judgment that will last for 70 years through the agency of Nebuchadnezzar.

When Jeremiah proclaimed this message, the response was rejection. People said, “That cannot be. God loves us. Nothing bad will ever happen to us. This is God’s house. He will not let it be torn down. This is God’s city. He will not let it be besieged. This is God’s nation. He will not let it be attacked.” And Jeremiah said, “No, He will. He will.” And that is precisely because the sin of the nation has reached the tipping point. God says, “I am sending you to exile.” The leaders of the society protested. The priests, the prophets, the leading officials heard Jeremiah’s message, and to their ears, it sounded like treason. It sounded very unpatriotic. And they said, “You deserve to die for such a message.” In Jeremiah 26:11, we read:

“Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, ‘This man deserves the sentence of death, because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears.’”

Yet, Jeremiah was speaking the truth.

In Jeremiah 27, it's 12 years later. It's the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah, a new king in Judah, and God's word comes to Jeremiah again. From chapter 28, we see that this is in the fourth year of Zedekiah. A lot has happened in these 12 years. In 597 BC, Jehoiakim the king rebelled against the king of Babylon and was killed. Jehoiachin, his son, becomes king at age 18. While the Babylonian army is moving against the city, Jehoiachin reigns for three months. Then the city is attacked, and the king and queen and the leading officials are carried off into Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar installs a new king. His given name is Mattaniah, but Nebuchadnezzar changes his name to Zedekiah. Zedekiah becomes a vassal of the king of Babylon.

Jeremiah's life and ministry are at a time of tremendous international upheaval, not different from our own. The world is shaking. Where can God be seen? Zedekiah is forced to give an immense annual tribute. A thousand talents of silver and one talent of gold every year is paid to the king of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar's own throne is not entirely secure. He faces a palace coup in 594 BC and almost loses everything. But the palace coup is discovered, and Nebuchadnezzar himself boasts in the Babylonian records, "I killed the usurper with my own bare hands." This is not a guy to mess with. But in 593 BC, this moment that we encounter in Jeremiah 27 and 28, Nebuchadnezzar appeared to be weak, so surrounding Jerusalem to conspire and plot a revolt to unshackle themselves from Nebuchadnezzar's nations came to rule.

It's at this moment that Jeremiah the prophet appears publicly with a startling enactment of God's Word. In Jeremiah 27:2, we read:

"Thus the LORD said to me: 'Make yourself straps and yoke-bars, and put them on your neck.'"

And Jeremiah takes the yoke that is designed for a team of oxen, a heavy wooden crossbar, and he puts this on his shoulders.

He comes out into the temple courts, and he speaks in the courts of the temple wearing this heavy yoke. Jeremiah appears in this prophetic sign



act, and then he speaks God's Word. In Jeremiah 27:5-9, we read:

"It is I who by My great power and My outstretched arm have made the earth, with the men and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever it seems right to Me. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, My servant, and I have given him also the beasts of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes."

Then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave. But if any nation or kingdom will not serve this Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence,' declares the LORD, 'until I have consumed it by his hand. So do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your fortune-tellers, or your sorcerers, who are saying to you, "You shall not serve the king of Babylon."'"

In Jeremiah 27:12, Jeremiah speaks to Zedekiah publicly and says:

"Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people and live."

Jeremiah is saying that God is actually working and using Nebuchadnezzar to bring about divine discipline on you, on us. And if you do not submit to that, then you are not in fact rejecting Nebuchadnezzar. You are rejecting God.

Jeremiah's public announcement is startling, and it is publicly rejected in Jeremiah 28 by a priest named Hananiah. Hananiah's personal signate seal was found and is in a museum in Berlin today. You can tell that Hananiah was a priest because the area around the inscription is a set of pomegranates. The inscription is written in what scholars call PaleoHebrew. This is the Hebrew that Abraham and David wrote in. It says on the inside of the seal that this seal belongs to Hananiah, son of Azzur. What does Hananiah do? He stands up and pretends to speak for God. In Jeremiah 28:1-4, he speaks:



"... Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: 'I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the LORD'S house, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon,' declares the LORD, 'for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'"

Hananiah is saying, "Yes, we have had one wave of exile in 605 BC (Daniel and his companions and many others) and another wave of exile in 593 BC (the king and the queen and many leading officials). But within just two years everyone is coming back, and God will break the yoke of the king of Babylon." Then he comes up to Jeremiah, lifts the yoke off Jeremiah's shoulders, and he breaks it. It's a dramatic confrontation in the public square.

Jeremiah turns and, in Jeremiah 28:15, he says to Hananiah:

"Listen, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie."

That's a devastating word. It's devastating when people try to make you trust in a lie and pretend to speak for God and they are not. When we compare the messages of Jeremiah and Hananiah, the messages are so different. Jeremiah says that we will be taken into exile for 70 years. Hananiah says we are coming right back. Jeremiah's message throughout his 23 years of ministry makes one consistent public demand on the hearers, which Hananiah does not. Jeremiah's preaching and prophetic ministry tell us that the one thing that is required of us is repentance. Hananiah's message is prosperity without repentance, restoration without repentance, comfort without contrition, salvation without seeking God. Dear brothers and sisters, that's a lie.

Jeremiah looks at Hananiah and continues, saying in Jeremiah 28:16:

"Therefore thus says the LORD: 'Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the LORD.'"

Five months later, Hananiah drops dead. Jeremiah reveals his true colors by not gloating in that victory. There is no celebratory dance: "I was right. Plan the funeral for this guy." What Jeremiah does is to write a letter, a pastoral letter, and that is what we have in chapter 29. It's a letter, we read in verse one, that Jeremiah sends from Jerusalem to the elders of the exiles, the priests, prophets, and all the people who have already been taken into exile. It's so heartwarming to think that Daniel and his companions are among the recipients of this letter. It was after the king had been taken in the second wave. The letter was carried by trusted envoys, people who were associated with Hilkiyah, the priest, the one who had discovered the book of the law during the reign of Josiah.

His letter is the first pastoral letter. Twenty-one of the 27 New Testament books are letters to help us know how to live out our faith. This is like an Old Testament letter. The Lord speaks in this letter and tells the exiled community the habits of discipleship where they are. In Jeremiah 29:5, He says:

"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce."

If you have been with us throughout this fall, you should hear those words "build" and "plant" as the turning point of Jeremiah's life and ministry. When God called him into ministry, He told him, *"I have appointed you as a prophet to the nations."* There was a destructive aspect to God's word through him and then a constructive word. The constructive part of his ministry was signaled with the verbs "build" and "plant." This is the turning point of the whole book. God says to build and plant. Then He continues in Jeremiah 29:6:

“Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.”

The Lord speaks to the exiled community and tells them basically, “You are going to be here for three generations, so live with a view to your grandchildren.” This is exciting. There is something really powerful in saying, “Live with a view to the effect on your grandchildren.”

And that is what He says. In Jeremiah 29:7, He continues:

“But seek the welfare [shalom] of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare [shalom] you will find your welfare [shalom].”

This is really something. Seek the *shalom* of Babylon? Pray to the Lord on its behalf? We might have expected the Lord to say, “It’s still okay for you to pray while you are in Babylon.” But I do not think any of us expected the Lord to say, “I want you to pray for Babylon.” Babylon will not be our permanent home, but it is our present home.

In Jeremiah 29:10, the Lord says:

“When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.”

This great promise is grounded by the breathtaking statement of Jeremiah 29:11:

“‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans for welfare [shalom] and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.’”

These plans are for *shalom*, not for evil, not for disaster. Whatever difficulty you may face now or in the future, in the hands of your loving, good, powerful Heavenly Father there is a long-term aim for your good. Do not try to throw it off. Receive that from His hand. God has plans for a future for us and a hope that is to be fulfilled. “To give you a future”—the Hebrew word used here is *“aharit,”* which means an ending. It’s really like the Old Testament equivalent of eschatology. It means that God has an end that He is working at and bringing us toward. You will never be abandoned. You will never be forsaken. God says, *“I will never leave you or forsake you.”* Will He discipline us in love? Yes, He will. Will that refine our faith and strip away our idols? It will, and that is for our good. “The resolution of exile will be that you will call upon Me and pray to Me.” And God says, “I will hear you. I will *shema* you.” Remember, when our hard-heartedness had reached such a point in Jeremiah’s ministry, where he had announced that the Lord said, “I am no longer listening to you.”? Now the Lord says, “I will hear you, and you will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.” The God who authorizes exile is the God who promises restoration.

Walter Brueggemann said:

“While Jeremiah’s word is characteristically one of judgment, it is striking that this voice of judgment brings with it a powerful voice of hope. The suffering of exile is for the OT the matrix in which the hope of God is most powerfully and characteristically at work.”

Brueggemann, though he is an Old Testament scholar, says:

“The exile is the place where God’s faithful promises work a profound newness. Nowhere is this more passionately voiced than in the tradition of Jeremiah. Thus the completed tradition anticipates Paul: *‘Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.’*”

The passage in Jeremiah 29:11, *“‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for shalom and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope,’”* reveals a good ending that God has in view.

Jeremiah’s letter reframes our experience. It changes us from refugees to residents. We live here now. It changes us from mourners, who are mourning the loss, to missionaries. We are here, and we serve God’s interests in this foreign place. It redefines us from being victims to being visionaries who have been entrusted with God’s sight of the future of the world. Jeremiah 29:11 and this pastoral letter that Jeremiah writes from the Lord to the people of God encourage us to:

Number one: Trust in God’s enduring sovereignty over all nations. We have to have this. And if that was true then, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. I do not want you to say things like, “Oh, what is going on in the world today?” I do not want you to say that because God did not run the universe in the 6th century BC and stop running it now. God is working out plans. He will discipline us in His love. He will use the most unlikely people for His purposes, and He will also call them to account and hold them to account when He is ready to do so. So trust Him; really trust Him. Do not be down. Do not be sad. Do not be in despair. The devil is sad and in despair. His ending is bad.

Number two: Distance yourself from false brokers of peace and prosperity, promising all kinds of things that they cannot deliver. One of the ways that you always can recognize a false prophet or a salesman is that someone is promising something to you that costs nothing. There is no future glory and no restoration without a repentance and seeking God. You cannot enter the Kingdom without humbling yourself and turning to God. Hananiah’s message misses this crucial piece.

Number three: **Welcome the Lord's discipline in your life.** I will never forget the January series that we heard a couple of years ago. Four different pastors preached on the same verse, saying that our light and momentary afflictions are preparing and working in us an eternal weight of glory that is far beyond all comparison. That's steel for the soul. And that means you can trust God. Sometimes God will take something away from us, and then He will give it back in His time. As people who trust Him, we welcome the Lord's discipline into our lives.

Number four: **Embrace the unchanging imperatives of committed followers of Jesus.** These habits of the exile life are enduring. Build a house. Dwell in it. That is how Jesus ends the Sermon on the Mount. "You build a house by hearing My words and obeying them." Plant a garden. Eat its fruit.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that one of the most difficult things to get seminarians to do during their seminary training during World War II was to play. I thought that was so fascinating. They said, "How do we play when the world is at war?" And Bonhoeffer said, "God is still working. He is sovereign." Plant the garden. Eat the tomatoes.

The world will not come to a screeching halt any time before God is ready to end it all. And the only chronological indication He has given us is that the Great Commission is fulfilled. So plant a garden. Build a house. Dwell in it. Get married. Have kids. Raise them to know the Lord. Get excited about your grandkids. Make sure they know the Lord. Grandparents are secret weapon disciple-makers. Timothy's faith blossomed because his grandmother loved Jesus.

We live out the Christian life in a place that is not our mother city. That is true for all of us. Peter calls Christians exiles. We are exiled from our mother city. The New Jerusalem will come down in the end, and we will walk through its gates. I am looking forward to that. But until that time, we need to be faithful in the land of our exile, knowing that we will eventually be restored.

We are in a different position than the recipients of Jeremiah's letter in one profound way. The people who received Jeremiah's letter had to take the content of the letter by faith. They were not able to see what you and I are able to see: that God did in fact keep His promise. The mighty awe-inspiring Babylonian Empire did last for just 70 years, three generations, and it ended in a night. The exiled community did return by the edict of Cyrus the Persian king. God's promised great and glorious future, a full restoration, and a new covenant would be carried out. We would hear His voice speak to those who are weary and heavy laden. "*Take My yoke upon you, and I will give you rest.*" The *shalom*, the well-being that we seek, Jesus Christ

declares after His resurrection from the dead. It is His first word to the disciples: *"Shalom, peace, I give to you."*

Dear brothers and sisters, we embrace the life of faith with full confidence as people of great hope and unshakable trust in God. We are people whose faith is unshaken by tumultuous world events, the comings and the goings of earthly kings and rulers who pass by into near anonymity, while the name of Jesus Christ grows more and more recognized throughout all the world. That is how we are supposed to live. And that is why this letter is so precious.

It's not wrong to put Jeremiah 29:11 on a graduation mug or on a frame. It's wonderful, and it's true. But, oh, how much more beautiful it is when you see how and when it was originally spoken. It was true then, and it is true now. No matter what you are facing, what you are going through this morning, what we are going through, I want to invite us to turn to God, to place our trust afresh in Him.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we trust You this morning, and we place our confidence rightly in You. Lord, we trust Your sovereignty. We welcome Your discipline in our lives. We praise You, God, that You always speak the truth. We pray that You would help us to embrace the habits of the exile life and that, Lord, You would build in us an unshakable hope. And I pray, Lord, even now for those among us who need prayer in specific situations that You would allow us to minister to one another and to pray for one another even as we worship and voice our great hope in You, Lord Jesus.

In Your Name, Amen.