

THE WORDS AND TEARS OF JEREMIAH
(4) TRUTH HAS CONSEQUENCES

Jeremiah 29; 39-45; 52

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KEY SCRIPTURE

⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take 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. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD.

¹⁰For 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. ¹¹For 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. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I 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 (Jeremiah 29:4-14 NRSV).

MESSAGE

From 1950 to 1988 there was a popular television game show called "Truth or Consequences." Contestants were given a short amount of time to answer a trivia question. If they got the 'truth' part wrong then there would be "consequences" – usually some sort of zany stunt. According to the producer and original host, Ralph Edwards, most people preferred to get the question wrong so they could experience the "consequences." But this was because they anticipated that the consequences would be both fun and profitable.

The prophet Jeremiah would never be confused for a game show host but he did speak

about truth and consequences. His audience also preferred to get the truth wrong and still anticipated pleasant consequences. But life is not a game show. And because the people did not embrace the truth there were serious and dire consequences. For Jeremiah, truth has consequences. This is made especially clear in chapters 29, 39-45, and 52 in the book that bears his name.

Let's consider the last chapter first and then work in reverse order. Chapter 52 is kind of like an appendix that was added to the end of Jeremiah. It is remarkably similar to material found in 2 Kings (especially 24:18-25:30). The biblical books known as 1 and 2 Kings are books of history and, as their titles imply, cover the history of the kings of Israel including the kings of Judah that reigned during Jeremiah's forty year ministry.

This material from 2 Kings was added to the end of Jeremiah at a later date to provide independent confirmation that his prophecies were fulfilled. It has some minor details not mentioned by Jeremiah in his account found in chapters 39-45. Nevertheless, these chapters speak in more detail of the fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath.

Chapter 29 contains the words from a letter of Jeremiah that gives a preview of what is often called the Babylonian Exile or Captivity. This refers to a period when many Jews were taken into captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. Some were taken from the attack in 597 B.C. and the rest after the final siege of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. By the way, Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchanezzar, and "Nebuchanezzar" all refer to the same person – the son of the founder of the Babylonian Empire who ruled Babylon from 605-562 B.C.

At the risk of oversimplifying the largest book in the Bible, we can say that the prophecies of Jeremiah came in three stages.

"O Jerusalem, wash your heart clean of wickedness so that you may be saved" (Jer 4:14 NRSV)

In the first stage, Jeremiah says to his people, "Turn from evil and trust in God and God will bless you. But the consequence for failing to do this is that God will use the new regional power known as Babylon to bring judgment upon you." The leaders and the people did not listen.

Thus says the LORD, Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but those who go out to the Chaldeans shall live; they shall have their lives as a prize of war, and live (Jer 38:2 NRSV).

In the second stage, Jeremiah says, "OK, you still need to turn from evil and trust in God

but it's too late to avoid Babylon attacking you. What you need to do is surrender peacefully so you can survive. Otherwise the destruction will be horrific." Again, the leaders and the people did not listen. In fact, they threw Jeremiah into a cistern and branded him a traitor. But the Babylonian army marched on Jerusalem, then after a year long siege breached the walls, ransacked the city, slaughtered many of its occupants, destroyed the Temple, and led away many captives.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce (Jer 29:4-5).

In the third stage, Jeremiah says, "Yes, you still need to turn to God and walk in his ways. But your best option now is to live in exile in the Babylonian Empire. Don't let anybody tell you it's going to be short-lived. Count on seventy years at any rate. Make the best of it and I will richly bless you."

Some of the leaders and some of the people did not listen. They fled to Egypt instead where they generally had a miserable time. They even forced poor old Jeremiah to go with them. They also took Baruch, Jeremiah's faithful secretary. There, the prophet probably spent the remainder of his life. But we have no authentic record of his death.

There were others who did listen to Jeremiah and carried his words into exile. They embraced his words and subsequently became the only nation in history ever to return from exile. Some of the important truths we find here include:

1. Bloom where you are planted.

The prophet says:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce.
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 (29:5-6).

The phrase, "Bloom where you are planted," is not in the Bible but it accurately captures Jeremiah's intent. He is telling them to roll up their sleeves and get to the business of living. Some false prophets had told the people that the exile would be short-lived, but Jeremiah makes it clear it will last for many years. But God is with them and they were to be just as active, as fruitful, as industrious as if they were not in captivity.

Even today, Christ-followers are called upon to make the best of whatever situation we are in. We each have a calling to fulfill. This doesn't mean we have to be stuck in a situation if we learn we can apply our calling in a different way. But it does warn us against constantly daydreaming about a different life, a better line of work, or a new community since that will lead to personal instability and lack of productivity. Rather, let us take advantage of the opportunities God sets before us and be grateful for his presence with us.

2. Become good citizens.

The prophet says:

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (29:7).

In other words, Jeremiah is saying: "Become involved in making that place better for your having been there. Do not become detached and passive. Actively seek ways for bringing down the grace of God into that place where you now live." In much the same way, Christians are to be instruments of grace and peace in the midst of whatever culture we find ourselves.

Jesus has taught us that we are to be in the world but not of the world. When he prayed for his disciples in Gethsemane, he said:

I'm not asking that you take them out of this world but that you keep them safe from the evil one. They don't belong to this world, just as I don't belong to this world. (John 17:15–16 CEB).

Jesus speaks of the way we are to live on earth, even though we are citizens of heaven. Earlier, Jesus had said:

"Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God"
(Mark 12:17 CEB).

We are to be law-abiding¹ citizens within the culture in which we find ourselves, all the while knowing that this is not the culture to which we ultimately belong. Lloyd Ogilvie comments:

¹Our ultimate allegiance is to God. If a law forbids what God requires or requires what God forbids then it must not be followed.

Heaven is our real home. This earth is only the land of our exile, but it is a land nonetheless for which we are to pray and for which we are to seek peace.²

3. Be on guard.

The prophet says:

For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD (29:8-9).

The people needed to be vigilant. Babylon was a land of pagan gods. They were not to be led astray. But Jeremiah is even more concerned about so-called prophets from among his own people.

How like our present world. It is easier to see the dangers to faith outside the church than within it. Paul writes passionately to the Galatian Christians who were being led astray:

You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ (Gal 1:7 NLT).

He was not talking about outsiders. These were people claiming to be from the household of God. This is why the spiritual gift of discernment (1 Cor 12:10) is such a vital gift for the health of the church. We need to discern what is of God and what is not.

4. Bank on the future God has for you.

The prophet says:

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. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart (29:11-13).

If I had been part of the exile I would have been tempted to give in to hopelessness even

²Guest, J., & Ogilvie, L. J. (1988). Jeremiah, Lamentations (Vol. 19, p. 196). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc.

after hearing the promise of God for a return. After all, according to Jeremiah it wasn't going to happen in my lifetime and maybe not even in my children's lifetime. But this misses the point.

The real promise is not a connection with a spot on the map but intimacy with the Creator of the universe. "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart" (29:13). This is still true today. Just as the first exiles read Jeremiah's words like a letter from home, so also we should read Scripture like a letter from home. This letter tells us of a future we can bank on, an encouragement that will keep us from falling away in the land of exile, and a hope that will sustain us until we come into the new Jerusalem.

Here are truths from Jeremiah we can embrace:

Bloom where you are planted.
Become good citizens.
Be on guard.
Bank on the future God has for you.

And remember – truth has consequences.