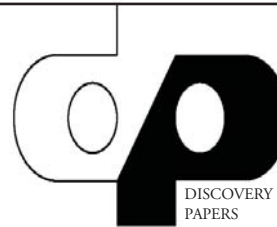


# WHAT IS THERE TO DO IN BABYLON ANYWAY?

*SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP*



Catalog No. 091004  
Jeremiah 29:1-14  
12th Message  
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*Escape is such a thankful Word  
I often in the Night  
Consider it unto myself  
No spectacle in sight*

*Escape — it is the Basket  
In which the Heart is caught  
When down some awful Battlement  
The rest of Life is dropt —*

*'Tis not to sight the savior —  
It is to be the saved —  
And that is why I lay my Head  
Upon this trusty word —<sup>1</sup>*

We all experience times in our lives when we want to escape. Perhaps the circumstances involve a difficult marriage, a terrible job, a really crazy schedule, or a painful friendship. Whether the circumstances are short-term or long-term, sometimes it feels like there is no way forward, and we just want out.

As we continue our study in Jeremiah this morning, we're looking at a passage that is written to people who wanted to escape. Most of the passages that we've looked at so far have been written to the people of Jerusalem before the armies of Babylon destroyed their city. This passage addresses a group of people from Jerusalem who have already been deported to Babylon before Jerusalem itself has been completely destroyed. These people want to escape, but Jeremiah's instructions to them come as a bit of a surprise. He doesn't tell them how to escape. He tells them how to endure. But that leaves them asking the question, "What's there to do in Babylon?"

This rings true for us as well; there are many times in our lives when we want to escape, but God calls us to endure. But endurance is hard. What do we do while we await the not-yet? What's there to do in Babylon?

Jeremiah 29:1-14 shows us how Jeremiah instructs the people of God to endure. We will see these people living in exile, and we will realize that, on a very deep level, all of us are in exile. And we will see that Jeremiah's instructions to them are to endure the exile, rather than escape it. But in the midst of endurance, there is also hope.

## We Are In Exile

The first four verses of this passage give us an overview of the circumstances surrounding this letter. Verses 1-4:

**<sup>1</sup>This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. <sup>2</sup>(This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) <sup>3</sup>He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said: <sup>4</sup>This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:**

The first section of this passage establishes the context of this letter. Jeremiah is writing to the elders, priests, prophets, and others who have already been sent into exile. It helps to understand that God's people were sent into exile in three different waves. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 605 BC and sent the best and the brightest of the people away, and he set up a puppet king over the city. But that king rebelled and tried to become independent, so Nebuchadnezzar came again, conquered again, and sent away some more people. And the same thing happened all over again. By the third time, Nebuchadnezzar was tired of it, so in 587 BC he wiped out the entire city. That was the final destruction, when the temple was destroyed and all but the poorest people were sent into Babylon. So verses 1-4 describe a letter written to those who were carried out in that first wave, before Jerusalem was completely destroyed.

Think about these people for a moment. They have been deported to Babylon, but their home city is still standing. It looks to them that they may have lost the battle, but they can still win the war. All it takes is a miraculous intervention from God and they will be sent home. These people are in exile, but they haven't yet accepted that idea. They still hope that things will suddenly change and turn their way.

One of my favorite things to do on Sunday afternoons after church is go home and watch football. Last week I had set up my Tivo to record the 49ers football game, and I was planning on going home after a long morning to watch it. But right as I was leaving church, looking forward to getting home and watching the game, someone casually

mentioned, “Oh, the 49ers just lost.” I was really bummed, but I went home and watched the game anyway—I hadn’t heard any details about the game. And what ended up happening was that the 49ers were winning right up until the very end of the game. With 16 seconds to go in the game, the 49ers were still ahead. And even though I’d been told they lost, I still had this crazy hope that maybe the information was wrong. Maybe there would be some miracle and they’d still manage to win. But sure enough, they lost with 2 seconds to go.

That’s what these people in Babylon are like. God’s been telling them through Jeremiah that they are going to be taken into exile. Now they are in Babylon, but they still have this crazy hope that Jeremiah got it wrong. And we find out in other places in Jeremiah that the prophets and priests that went with them into exile are fueling this idea. The same prophets that said they wouldn’t go into exile in the first place and now saying that they’ll be home in time for Thanksgiving. So the first thing they need to do is realize that they are in exile. It may seem a bit strange to think of ourselves this way, but that’s the first thing this passage invites us to do as well: realize that, just like the Israelites in Babylon, we are in exile as well.

Now, most of us don’t think about ourselves as being in exile. But biblically, the people of God have always understood themselves as being in exile. The whole story of the Bible is about a people who have been exiled from their land and whom God is in the process of returning to their proper home. You didn’t know I was going to preach through the whole Bible this morning, but I am. So here it is:

- God created a home.
- God created people to live in that home.
- People blew it.
- God sent people out of his home.
- People lived in exile.
- God promised people they’d one day be able to return home. (We’re up to about Genesis 3 now, but here the pace picks up.)
- God prepared people for the solution to getting home. (That’s most of the rest of the Old Testament.)
- God did what it takes to let people come home. (That’s the gospels.)
- God told people how to wait until they finally got home. (That’s the rest of the New Testament.)
- God brought people home. (That’s Revelation.)

The last chapters of Revelation beautifully parallel the first chapters of Genesis; it’s the conclusion to a story about people who have lived in exile for an incredibly long time and who have finally been brought home.

So that’s us. We live in the part where God tells his people how to wait for the time when they can finally return home. You’ve signed the papers. The house is yours. You just don’t get the keys for a little bit longer. What it means

is that we’re still in exile. We’re still living in a world that has been broken, a world that bears a lot of resemblance to our real home (but isn’t quite), a world that needs to be made new before it can really be our home and we can come out of exile.

If you listen to the way we talk about our lives, you realize that this is true of everyone. We’re always looking for something that seems elusive. But our problem is that we are just like the Israelites in Babylon who don’t want to believe that it is as bad as it is. We don’t want to accept the fact that the 49ers are actually going to lose this game. We don’t want to accept the fact that we are in exile. We think things can be tweaked a bit and we’ll feel better. If I found the right job, then I’d be happy. If my spouse acted the way I want him/her to, my life would be fine. If we sang the songs I like at church, then I’d finally connect with God. If my friends treated me the way they should, then I wouldn’t be so lonely.

But the cold hard truth is that we are in exile. This world is broken. The problem isn’t your job, it isn’t your spouse, it isn’t your friends or your car or your health or your church. The problem is that this world is broken. The problem is that we were made to live in a beautiful garden and we’ve been dressing up our slum trying to make it look nice. We are in exile. And all we want to do is escape, to get to something better NOW. But Jeremiah gives us a different option. Let’s see what he says.

## We Are To Endure Our Exile

Verses 5-9:

**<sup>5</sup>“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup>Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. <sup>7</sup>Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” <sup>8</sup>Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. <sup>9</sup>They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD.**

So to a group of people who haven’t even unpacked their suitcases yet, Jeremiah’s instruction comes as quite a shock. He knows that the exile is actually going to last a fairly long time. He knows that God’s people are in for 70 years of living outside their land. And his instruction from God is that they should get comfortable with it. Jeremiah wants them to know that they are in exile, but to make the best of it.

He tells them to settle in Babylon. He wants them to build houses and plant gardens. Make this your permanent home. Come to grips with the idea that this is your new reality. This may not be home, but it’s where you’re living. Unpack your bags. Put the suitcase in the attic. He tells

them to stop putting their lives on hold and relate to each other. Take wives for yourselves. Have children. Take wives for your children. That means that this exile is going to last for at least two generations. That's right. So relate to each other in the midst of it.

But most surprisingly, he tells them to engage with the city. Seek the welfare of the city that they are living in. Now, you have to understand what a shocking statement this is in biblical terms. Babylon was the enemy with a capital E. The word "Babylon" would later become synonymous with "anti-God," representing everything that was opposed to the purposes of God. But now God says that His people should pray for the welfare of the Babylonians. The word used here is the Hebrew word *shalom*. God's people should pray for the *shalom* of Babylon. That's scandalous!

But these are His instructions. God's people are instructed not to hide themselves off in some little exile enclave and never interact with the city. They are supposed to integrate. Engage. Become a part of things in Babylon. The book of Daniel is a great example of someone who does this. Daniel doesn't try to escape the exile. He builds a house, plants a garden and seeks the welfare of the city. That's God's instruction to His people through Jeremiah. They want to escape the exile, but God tells them to endure it.

Now, if we read this letter as addressed to us in our exile, it becomes a powerful statement of what it means to live in this world. Many of us want to escape our exile, to make things better, to fix what doesn't work. But if our first instruction is to realize that things are broken, our second instruction is to make do among that brokenness. We must learn to endure the exile. This might be where we live a long time.

But when we're honest with ourselves, we'd much rather escape than endure. One way that we try to escape the exile is by retreating into a Christian sub-culture. We create our own music, our own language, our own schools, our own villages. We escape the exile of living in a world that doesn't know God by retreating to a world that completely affirms us in our beliefs and behaviors. The problem is that you can go to a Christian school, you can listen to Christian music, you can hang out only at church, but you can't actually escape the brokenness of this world. Now, I'm not against Christian music or Christian schools, but we can't treat these things as if they offer an escape from the world.

This is the mistake that the first pilgrims in America made. They thought they could escape the brokenness of English religious persecution and set up a city on a hill in the new land and, because they were all on the same page, things would be perfect. They even used language that compared the New World with the New Jerusalem. Their problem was that they brought their exile with them. They were still broken and sinful. Even in the New World, they were still in exile.

So the question we have to ask is how do we endure this exile and engage the world that we live in? How do we live here well, rather than trying to escape it by creating an alternate universe where everybody thinks just as we do? What does it mean for us to build houses here? What does it mean for you to plant a garden where you work, to build a house where you live, to engage with wherever your children go to school? What does it look like for you to stop trying to fix everything about your life and just live in it? Endure your exile. Make the best of it.

Sometimes we try to escape into a Christian sub-culture, but other times we try to escape by thinking that we can escape our exile by doing things the right way, that, by God's power, we can escape the exile now if we do things God's way. This is what I thought before I got married. I thought that marriage would finally free me from my exile of loneliness and insecurity. And I had read all the books on having a Christian marriage and was sure that, because I was going to do it "God's way," that married life would finally bring me home. But I was wrong; this side of Christ's final work of redemption, we still live in exile.

We as American Christians don't talk about hoping for heaven as much as we should. We're too focused on fixing things here to hope for something in the future. Realize, too, that there are false prophets who promise a short exile if you just follow their advice. They promise that the job God leads you to will be perfectly fulfilling. They promise that if you have your quiet time every morning that you'll be spiritually alive. They promise that if you ever feel lonely or depressed or angry or lustful or disappointed that you just have to apply the right biblical principle and you'll feel better again.

But this is a lie. We can't escape the fact that this world is broken. We can't escape the fact that we are broken. We can't escape the fact that things in this life simply don't work. God doesn't guarantee us fulfilling marriages or obedient kids or faithful friends or stimulating jobs. Following biblical principles won't fix the brokenness of this world. We are in exile, remember? The brokenness of this world will be fixed by Jesus, not by the how-to books in a Christian bookstore.

A few years ago, I read a book entitled *Families Where Grace Is in Place*, by Jeff VanVonderen. In it, he writes of a time when he and his wife were in marriage counseling. The counselor asked them the following question: "How would things have to be made different in order for you to become a happy person?" Predictably, his wife's list consisted of things she wanted him to do differently, and his list consisted of things he wanted his wife to do differently. So after sharing their lists, the counselor began to work on helping each of them find ways to make the other spouse happier by trying to do the things on their list.

But VanVonderen counsels people differently. You see, he understands that the couples who come to him are living in exile. And he understands that God's call for us here and now is to endure the exile. So he asks them a very different question: "How are you going to be a happy



person even if nothing changes in your marriage?” Couples are typically shocked by the question because most of them want him to help them escape their exile. But he’s asking them to learn to endure it. Build houses. Plant gardens. Find out how to live well in Babylon.

So this is the invitation to us. Find out what there is to do in Babylon. Don’t just try to escape. You want desperately to be married? Ask God what He is doing in your singleness. You’re out of work? You’re over-committed? What is God doing in your situation? What is God doing in your doubts and skepticism? What is He doing in your pain?

Henri Nouwen, a great author who learned to embrace his own personal exile, said, “When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope.”

## We Are To Hope For Home

And this is where we are headed next. Because if the message to God’s people is simply to endure the exile and that’s all there is, then it really is a depressing message. But there is more. There is a promise in the midst of exile, as we will see in verses 10-14. This is one of the most beloved promises in the Bible, but it is sometimes misunderstood, so let’s examine it in its context. Verses 10-14:

**10 This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. 11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. 12 Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”**

This is the promise that God gives His people. He tells them that they are going to be in exile for seventy very long years. But then He tells them that He will fulfill His promise to them, that He will bring them back. So in the midst of endurance, there is a promise. Jeremiah 29:11 is a favorite verse for a lot of people because it is such a hopeful promise. The God of the universe has plans to prosper us, plans for our future, plans for us to have hope. That’s incredible.

But we need to be careful not to read this verse as if it’s on the inside of a Hallmark greeting card. This verse is not blind, religious idealism. We need to read it in its context. In verse 10, God tells His people that they are going to be in exile for seventy years. Most of those people won’t

live that long. But in verse 11, he promises that, at the end of that period, He will restore them. He does have good plans for them, but those plans aren’t pie-in-the-sky theology. They are plans for redemption, for restoration from a long exile.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, “We’re not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be.” God gives His people a promise to do the best for them. But for these people, it turns out to be a painful process to get there. I said this last week, but I’ll say it again: God’s plan for His people usually involves taking them through suffering, not around it.

So God gives them a hopeful promise in the midst of exile. And here we see the second aspect of Jeremiah’s instruction for them on how to live in Babylon. They need to realize they are in exile. They need to endure the exile. But they must have hope that eventually God will bring them home. They need to know that God is still at work, even in their exile, and that He has plans ultimately to prosper them, plans to bring them home.

The same is true for us. As we accept the terms of our own exile and learn to endure it, we must also remember that God is at work, and His ultimate plan is for us to be restored. Our exile will not last forever. Along with the Israelites in Babylon, we are instructed to hope for home.

And sure enough, after 70 years, God’s people were able to return to their land. The Persian king Cyrus sent the Jews back to their land with instructions to rebuild their lives and a blank check to make that possible. The people were released from exile. But it didn’t take long for them to realize that the exile wasn’t actually completely over. Yes, they were in Jerusalem. Yes, they rebuilt the temple. But the temple wasn’t as impressive as it used to be. And even though they were living in Jerusalem, they were still subjects of the Persian Empire. It didn’t seem that the promise had been fulfilled as much as they had hoped.

And that was because they may have been set free from Babylon, but based on our understanding of the story of the Bible, they were still in exile. They still hadn’t gotten back to the garden. And so we know that even if the temple has been as great as it was in Solomon’s day, and even if they had been an independent kingdom again, they would have still been in exile because they still weren’t back in the garden. They still hadn’t been restored from the brokenness of this world.

And that’s why, by the time we get to the gospels, we see Jesus doing a whole bunch of things to let people know that He is going to be the one to finally restore them from their exile. He sets Himself up as the new Moses. He crosses the Jordan just like Moses crossed the Red Sea. His father brings Him down to Egypt and then out of Egypt again back to the promised land. And so Jesus comes and starts the process of fulfilling the promises that God will finally release His people from their exile.

And this is where we find ourselves. We live in a place

that isn't too different than these exiles in Babylon. We live in exile in a world that isn't our home. We live in a broken world that will never be able to allow us to experience connection with God and connection with each other and fulfillment in our work and the joy of life that we once had in the garden. But we have been promised that God is in the process of restoring us and gathering back out of exile. We know the promise that is fulfilled in Revelation. We know the hope that we have to look forward to. In the meantime we are asked to endure our exile and engage with the world that we live in. Jesus tells His followers that they are to be in the world, but not of the world. They can't escape this world; they must engage with it. But they also have hope that they are not ultimately of this world. They are headed for something more.

This is why we as Christians pray the Lord's Prayer: We ask for God to restore us from exile, we beg God to send Jesus on His return. We pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We want His kingdom. We want the promises we see at the end of Revelation. We hope for the day when we will be welcomed home. But for now we are called to endure. We learn how to love each other amidst our brokenness. We learn to love this broken world and offer it the hope that we know. And as we hope for home, we ask for the strength to endure. "Give us this day our daily bread." Help us be here now and not simply try to escape our circumstances.

## Conclusion

We need to realize that we are in exile. This is not our home. Things here simply don't work and they never will. We need to learn to endure this exile, to have the strength and determination to engage with where we are instead of choosing the easy way out and escaping. And we need to know that there is hope in the midst of our exile. There is something more coming. God does have plans for our future.

Emily Dickinson wrote,

*'Tis not to sight the savior --  
It is to be the saved --  
And that is why I lay my Head  
Upon this trusty word --*

She doesn't wait for a savior. She doesn't look for something to make things better. She just wants to escape. The very word itself is a comfort to her because it promises her relief from her situation. So she lays her head upon the very word "escape."

But Jeremiah offers us something more, something deeper. He offers us a different word to lay our heads upon. His word asks us to endure, but promises that we will eventually get to go home. Not escape, but home. Through Jeremiah, God says,

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

Dickenson may not wait for a savior, but we do. We endure our exile now because we know we're going home. May we grow in our endurance and our hope.

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Dickinson, *Escape is such a thankful Word*