



TIME OF GRACE®

Out of Context: "Plans to Prosper You"

Study Notes

Summary

“Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” These words from Jeremiah chapter 29 are found on coffee cups and Pinterest art. They remind us that God has plans to bless and prosper his suffering people. But make sure to read the context. Jeremiah spoke these words to people who had been taken captive in war. And they were not about to go home. God had great plans for his people, but they didn’t involve a quick fix to all their earthly problems. In the same way, God’s plan to prosper your spiritual life might not be the path you prayed for.

- **Jeremiah 29:11:** “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.”
- **Jeremiah 29:1-11:** ¹This 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. ²(This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) ³He 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: ⁴This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Marry 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. ⁷Also, 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.” ⁸Yes, 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. ⁹They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD. ¹⁰This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For 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.”
- Despite our _____, God _____ has plans.

- **Jeremiah 23:5,6:** ⁵“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. ⁶In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.”

Points to Ponder

1. What unwise/sinful choices from your past have left you with consequences in the present? Do you expect God to make those consequences end soon? Why or why not?
2. Which word from Jeremiah 29:11 gives you the most encouragement? Which word would come in second place?
3. Read Hebrews 12:4-13. Find three truths that will help you handle the tough seasons of life when you are weary and losing hope.

Homework for Next Week

Read 1 Peter 3:8-12.

Time of Grace Ministry
Out of Context: Plans to Prosper You
Jeremiah 29:1-11
February 28, 2021

Pastor Mike Novotny

Many Christians have actually given Jeremiah the prophet a nickname. Do you know what it is? He was called the weeping prophet. Apparently, his message was so difficult and so challenging and so many people didn't want to hear it that he would weep himself to sleep and say, "God, what am I doing? Why did you give me this message?" Which is not a common reaction in contemporary culture to that verse.

So my daughter jumped on a bandwagon. A couple of weeks ago, my littlest girl, Mya, had to do a project and she told us as her family that her new all-time favorite Bible passage was Jeremiah 29:11. And if you're new to the Bible and new to church, you might know that that is a very, very, very popular famous verse. If you've never seen it before, let me show you the words of Jeremiah 29:11: "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."

That's a wildly famous verse. In fact, the YouVersion Bible app, which has currently been installed on smartphones and tablets over 336 million times, says that this passage is the second most popular passage on planet earth. In 2017, it finished just ahead of John 3:16, which took the bronze, and just behind Joshua 1:9, which took the gold.

And that's why if you hang around churches and Christian culture enough, you will hear Jeremiah 29:11 everywhere. You'll see it on t-shirts and coffee cups, Christian stationeries and as school mottos. Some eighth graders might choose it as their confirmation verse. Some Christian high schools will have a whole graduation sermon based on Jeremiah 29:11. You might see it painted all like Pinterest-y on a shiplap wall in some Christian suburban home. It's super famous. In fact, boxer Evander Holyfield once fought in a professional boxing match with some customized trunks and what did he have stitched across the waistband? "Jer 29:11."

And if you look at the verse, you can see why it's so popular. Here's one simple passage that says God, the God of heaven and earth, has plans - not just plans for him or her or them - but plans for you. They're not plans to hurt you or condemn you or exclude you. They're plans to prosper you and to give you hope and to give you a future and, honestly, who wouldn't want more of that?

But can I burst your bubble today? I think most Christians have taken that famous passage out of context. I think if the prophet Jeremiah was here and he would go to the Christian graduation or walk into the suburban Christian home and look around, he would say, "Really? You quoted me now?" Because if you wouldn't read just that one little verse but you would read the chapter that

Jeremiah wrote it in and, in fact, the whole book called Jeremiah in the Old Testament, you would find out that it's not as warm and fuzzy as that passage sometimes feels. Many Christians have actually given Jeremiah the prophet a nickname. Do you know what it is? He was called the weeping prophet. Apparently, his message was so difficult and so challenging and so many people didn't want to hear it that he would weep himself to sleep and say, "God, what am I doing? Why did you give me this message?" Which is not a common reaction in contemporary culture to that verse. In fact, in preparing to speak to you today, I actually breezed through the book of Jeremiah; skimmed the section and chapter headings. It's the longest book in the Bible - 52 chapters - and if you would just read the headings, and not even all the verses, you would find out that Jeremiah did not have the easiest job. I mean, half of his chapters headings could be like names of heavy metal songs. They're like, "Cup of Wrath," and "Day of Disaster," and "Religion is Worthless," and, "Idolatress People." He had a hard, hard message that he preached for 40 years as a prophet.

In fact, not just the book, but this chapter itself was a hard message. Do you know when the original church heard Jeremiah speak the words that culminated in verse 11, do you know how they reacted to it? "Get him!" They went in to arrest Jeremiah, put iron shackles around his neck, and drag him off to be tortured, if not killed, which I have never seen happen at a Christian graduation ceremony when Jeremiah 29:11 is quoted.

Now I'm not saying my daughter should love the passage any less. And I'm not saying you have to throw out all your coffee mugs or burn your Christian t-shirts that have Jeremiah 29:11. I just want to make sure that you turn to that passage at the right time in your life. So if you're here today or you're podcasting this message or watching it on TV and your life is pretty good, there are a whole lot of good Bible passages to read in that moment but Jeremiah 29:11 is not your passage. And if you came to church today and you're surrounded by family members that you like and love and good friends and your body's feeling pretty strong, there are amazing passages to recite and to remember but Jeremiah's not one of those passages. If your biggest struggle is worrying if it's going to rain on your weekend or your day off so you can get the boat out on the water or you're just concerned about who the Green Bay Packer's backup quarterback is going to be for the upcoming season, like if that's the biggest burden and worry of your life, well, there's a lot of Bible passages that you could read but please don't read this one because I want you to save this passage for the context that Jeremiah wrote it in. And here's the context: When your life is really hard and it's kind of your fault, this is your passage. When now or in the future you find yourself at a spot in life that you never would have chosen when you were 18 years old and it's a mess and it's complicated and it's frustrating and as you look back, it's partially your fault, I want you to stick a bookmark in Jeremiah 29:11 and read it until it gives you all the hope that you need. When you mess it up and you sin and you feel like there is no future and there is no hope, I want you to find a Bible because this is your verse, Jeremiah 29:11.

I bet some of you right now are in that place. There are some major regrets you have about life. And I know that all of us at some time in life are going to be in that place so I want to prepare your heart today to plant this passage as a seed so it grows something beautiful so you never feel like you don't have hope or don't have a future or God doesn't have great plans to prosper you in years to come. So today, let me teach you Jeremiah 29:11; not just the snippet but the context.

Kind of near the end of the Old Testament, Jeremiah spends 40 years, his entire career, reaching out with the compassion of God; telling the people to repent and they won't listen. And so they go into exile during the life of Jeremiah and that's the context.

So if you have a Bible with you, you want to turn on your Bible, or just follow along on the screen, let's look what happens in Jeremiah 29. Alright: "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. (This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem). He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah," - are you taking notes on all these names? There's going to be a quiz after church. "And to Gemariah son of Hilkiyah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said, 'This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.'" You got that? Nope? Alright, let me help.

Alright, so Jeremiah the prophet is down in the city of Jerusalem and he is with a king named Zedekiah, who will be the last king of Judah. There was a whole bunch of people who are still there but most of the people aren't there anymore. They've been taken about 800 miles away to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. There's about 10,000 Israelites and there's a whole bunch of their prophets and their priests and the old King Jehoiachin and what you need to know is that in Babylon, all those prophets were claiming that they had this word from God for the people. And the word they brought was, "It's going to be okay. Our God is a God of love and compassion and power and he is just about to save us. Any day now, any week now, our God is going to crush King Nebuchadnezzar and all of us will get to go back home to our beds and our homes and our backyards and our people." But then these two messengers come to Babylon with a letter and the letter is from Jeremiah the prophet. God spoke to him about the future of the exiles and if you can just imagine the emotion of that moment, imagine being dragged in the middle of the night away from your home to a whole other country and you're terrified and you desperately want to go home and now here is God's decision. And all the exiles gather around the messengers as they unroll the scroll and they read the letter of what God has decided for his people.

And here's what God said: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 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. 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." Which sounds kind of nice, doesn't it? Like plant and enjoy the produce and plan weddings and have babies and rock your grandkids in your arms. There's peace and there's prayer and there's prosperity but did you catch the underlying message? You're not going home. There's a reason we don't plant a garden at a bus stop or remodel the hotel room we're staying in at a Holiday Inn because we're not going to be there long. But God said plant a garden and build a house and plan the wedding and raise the kid because you're not going home today or tomorrow or the time when your kid turns eighteen. Your kid's going to grow up and marry and they're going to plan another wedding and those kids

are going to have kids because most of you will never get back home, no matter what those really warm and fuzzy prophets told you.

You know, God speaks about those prophets in verse eight; look what he says. "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. They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,' declares the Lord."

"This is what the Lord says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.'" Seventy years, God said. You won't listen to me and now there's a consequence. Seventy years I'm going to have to put you on this stair, this massive timeout, until you learn what it means to have no other gods and seek me with all of your heart.

And that might seem like some obscure historical story but there's some really important lessons in those words for you and for me, today. Let me just focus on two lessons that I see. Number one is to be aware of the Pinterest prophets. You know, in every age and in every generation, there will always be prophets; probably a majority of people, spiritual voices, who speak in the name of God, in the name of Jesus, maybe even quoting a Bible passage that tell you exactly what you want to hear. Now the prophets in Jeremiah's day did it. They said, "You're fine; God loves you. You know, you be you. You don't have to change and God's going to save you." And it wasn't true. And I want to warn you that still exists today because pastors like me and priests and bloggers and Christian celebrities, we're human so part of us really wants to be liked. None of us wants to weep at the end of the day that our work was in vain because no one wants to hear our message. There is a deep desire to compromise the things that God says. In fact, you can always find a church and a spiritual leader, a prophet, who will tell you exactly what you want to hear. If you go on Pinterest, you will find a lot of warm and fuzzy and flowery Bible passages but do you know what you'll never find? "Repent - Jesus." But that's what he taught.

If I would never confront you and ask you to change, if I would say that God loves you just as you are and you should stay that way, the only way that would be possible is if you were already God and sinless. But otherwise, a faithful prophet, a faithful church, and a good pastor will always confront you in love. And you hope those conversations are few and far between. They are the exception and not the rule but make sure you don't run away from those who love you and run to those who will tell you just what you always wanted them to say. You know, life is complicated in these changing times. What will not help the family of God and grow the church of God are people who compromise the word of God.

But here's the second lesson: That even if there are consequences, life's not over. I've thought about that - these people, the people of Israel, had been given so many chances. Jeremiah had begged and pleaded and wept with them for 40 years and even though they had stiff-armed him for decades, what does God do? He still reaches out. And he says I want to bless your gardens and I want to bless your families and I want you to pray to me. I haven't closed my ear to you yet. God is still saying you might be mad about the place where I put you but I still have plans for you. And that's a lesson for you to learn. You might find yourself in a place in life and a

consequence where God disciplines you and you can either choose to be bitter about that place or you can lean on God and you can make it better.

I think about a guy that I know from our church family who is not here tonight because he's in jail. And it's kind of like his exile. And of course, he wishes he wasn't there and of course he wishes he was here among us and of course he wishes he could sleep in his own bed and eat good food but he can't. But whenever I visit him and whenever I write to him, I always expect him to be kind of mad and angry and bitter about all of it. Do you know what instead I find? He wants to make it better. You know, I come with my bookmark and my little Bible; ready for some encouraging, hopeful passage and I always have to change the passage because his attitude surprises me. And he says, "Pastor Mike, you won't believe these guys that I met in my cell block." And, "I started a Bible study and three guys came to it and six more said they're considering it and one guy's thinking about being baptized. Pastor, we want to baptize him in the prison shower. Is that okay with Jesus?" Yeah, like yes, that is okay with Jesus! And he gives me more joy because he's not bitter about the consequence; he's trying to make that place better.

So I've taught you Jeremiah 29:1-10 and now you're ready for the context. Let's catch Jeremiah's words: "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." And now that passage can be even more powerful than it was before because now you know the "you" that Jeremiah was talking to. These are people in exile; people who made some major spiritual mistakes. People whose lives were filled with consequences but what did God say? I have plans for you. And I want to prosper you. And I don't want to harm you. And I want to give you hope and a future. Not you nice, beautiful, functional Christian families but you who bring some major baggage and regret into church.

I love that, don't you? I know sometimes we smile and we shake hands when we gather but lots of us have lots of stuff going on. It might be an addiction. It might be multiple sexual partners in our past. It might be the divorce and the anger that is in our heart. It might be alcohol. It might be food. It might be self-righteousness. It might be control issues. We've all got something but despite the mess, Jeremiah still has this message: That God has plans for us. That life isn't over yet. That God is a God of ridiculous grace and incredible patience and it's for you. Not for him or them or those people who are better than you but for you. Even if you feel like you're in Babylon.

In fact, if you're taking notes in your program, I want you to write this down. It's our big idea that despite our sins, Jeremiah says, God still has plans. He's not done with you yet. Still, there's hope. He's not finished with your story. Still, there is a future. You might think that you lost your chance, like the people in exile, but God says, "No, no, no." Still.

And do you know how I know that? Because I read the context. If you would do the hard work this week of reading through Jeremiah, all the cup of wrath and day of disaster and worthless religion, do you know what you would find? You would find this passage in Jeremiah 23: "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, a king who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved

and Israel will live in safety and this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord our Righteous Savior." Anyone want to guess who that is? A branch from David's family tree? A king of Israel who unlike those 40 kings wouldn't try to fill his pockets and hold onto his sins but he would do what is just and right and wise? Someone who would lead God's people not into slavery and exile but into salvation and safety? Whose name would be the Lord our Righteous Savior? That's a prophecy about Jesus.

And Jesus is the reason that we can say "still." Because Jesus went to a cross, there is still hope. Because Jesus rose from the dead, there is still forgiveness. And if you believe in Jesus, no matter what happened last night, you can wake up every morning and say, "still." God still has plans. He still wants to prosper me. He still wants to give me a great future.

So I talked to this guy from our church this past week who wants to bring his friends here. And he's part of the recovery community and he's escaped some pretty hard drug abuse in his past and all of his friends have used meth and heroin and he wants them to come but he said, "Pastor, I don't want to like trick them. I don't want them to think if they come here like addiction is just gone and one church service or one prayer or just believing in Jesus makes everything better. I want them to come for the right reasons. So what should I tell them?" And maybe Jeremiah 29:11 is what he should tell them; that there is hope for addicts and there's a future, even if there are consequences because of the past. And Jesus might not bring you home out of Babylon; there might be a time you have to live with - maybe even 70 years there will be consequences and yet, because of Jesus, there is still salvation.

And that's what I want to tell you. I can't promise you that we can fix the marriage with all the counseling help that we can give. And I can't promise that we can fix the addiction or get you out of debt or make your family functional again. I hope we can - the Bible is powerful and effective - but here's what I can promise you. Even if it's a mess and even if you've messed 1,000 things up, there's still hope for the people of God. And this is our calling card. That's why we have a church. Not to fix lives here but to fix them forever. It's why we're connected to a Christian school and not just to instill good Christian morals and values but to instill Jesus Christ in every kid's heart. There's a community out there who thinks that places like this are where good church people get a little bit better but it's not. It's where messed up people find hope and a future.

So when you're messed up and you mess up, you come here, okay? And when you're embarrassed and you think these are the last people you want to see, I tell you, they're the first people you should run to because they will bring you to Jesus and in Jesus there's always hope.

And that's what I'm going to say on graduation day. You know, my little Mya is only in third grade right now; she's got a lot of years. But maybe if they ask me to be the graduation speaker, I know what I'm going to talk about. Can I tell you? I'm going to choose for my passage Jeremiah 29:11 and here's what I'm going to say: "God has a powerful word for us today. But it's not for you, Mr. Valedictorian, with the fancy little tassel on your hat." I'll try not to be bitter about it when I actually preach it. "And it's not for you, all you people who graduated with high honors and have great college plans for your future. It's not for you, mom and dad. I see

you holding hands with your perfect Instagram little marriage and your cheesy potatoes waiting at home for the graduation party," no, no, no. "It's not for you who have cakes waiting for you with your face somehow screen photoshopped on top of it. No, there are great Bible passages for you but not this one. No, this one is for you, girl, back there. Who doesn't get to walk the stage for graduation because you did something really stupid on prom night. This is for you. And for you, mom and dad, who couldn't even keep it civil after the divorce, even at your kid's graduation. Now there are three aunts and uncles sitting in between you. And this is for you, all you older brothers and sisters, who thought you were going to change the world when you were 18 and you found out you couldn't; you couldn't even change yourself. And all of you who woke up this morning and you didn't like what you saw in the mirror and you didn't like yourself or your life, I've got a passage for you and it goes like this: "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." Jeremiah 29:11 in context. Amen.

So let's pray.

Dear Jesus, thank you for hope. It's crazy that I could wake up this morning and not feel ashamed. To not have to live in the past, to not have to carry any burden because still, in you, there's forgiveness for a guy like me and a church like ours. I thank you, Jesus, that even if the next 70 years of our life are under discipline and with consequence, yet there will be 70 million years that are so good we would not believe you if you tried to tell us.

I thank you, God, for the worst of sinners that there is still hope because there is always a cross and an empty tomb. Thank you, Jesus, for not giving good advice when you came to this world but for giving good news and for giving yourself. And I pray now, God, for our church. There are so many people that we know that are staying away from you and your word because they don't understand what it's all about; they've taken something out of context. So help us to be that kind of people and that kind of church; that the doors are open wide to every addict, every convict, every person, every sinner; that they would be loved here because you love people just like that.

Thank you, God, for that one word still. And I pray against every bit of shame, every bit of guilt, every person who's carrying a burden today. Plant that seed in their heart today that it would grow into something beautiful. Still there's hope cause still there's Jesus.

We pray today, as always, in his beautiful name and all God's people said "Amen."