



HOW TO LIVE IN EXILE

Catalog No. 1318
 Jeremiah 27-29
 19th Message
 John Hanneman
 July 1st, 2001

Much of the book of Jeremiah is unfamiliar to Christians. But most of us know the wonderful verse that is an encouragement to so many: "For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope" (Jer 29:11).

Many believers commit these beautiful words to memory. We inscribe them on graduation cards. We share them to cheer up someone who is struggling or confused. This great promise encourages us when hope begins to wane. While these are familiar words, we are probably unaware of the context in which they are found. Today we will learn that context, which only serves to heighten the impact of what God speaks through his prophet Jeremiah.

The story begins in chapter 27, which introduces the historical context.

In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying (Jer 27:1, NASB)

The timeframe here is the beginning of Zedekiah's reign. Zedekiah was installed as a puppet king by Nebuchadnezzar, in 597 BC, when Jeconiah (Jehoiachin), and the queen mother, together with all the artists and craftsmen, and many of the temple treasures, were taken to Babylon. Zedekiah's rebellion led to the fall of Jerusalem, in 587 BC. Therefore, the events recorded here occurred between the first and second deportation to Babylon.

At this time, some of the Jews were living in exile in Babylon while others remained in Judah. There was a lot of tension between these two groups. Conventional wisdom would say that those still living in Judah were blessed, while those in Babylon were cursed. Both groups probably would have agreed with this. However, God's plans don't always follow conventional wisdom. The future really lay with the exiles. That is where God perfects his people — in exile. Those whom he chooses and uses almost invariably traverse a difficult road.

Here then is the message that God gave to Jeremiah.

thus says the LORD to me—"Make for yourself bonds and yokes and put them on your neck, and send word to the king of Edom, to the king of Moab, to the king of the sons of Ammon, to the king of Tyre and to the king of Sidon by the messengers who come to Jerusalem to Zedekiah king of

Judah. Command them to go to their masters, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, thus you shall say to your masters, I have made the earth, the men and the beasts which are on the face of the earth by My great power and by My outstretched arm, and I will give it to the one who is pleasing in My sight. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant, and I have given him also the wild animals 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 will make him their servant. It will be, that the nation or the kingdom which will not serve him, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and which will not 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 destroyed it by his hand. (Jer 27:2-8)

"But the nation which will bring its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will let remain on its land," declares the LORD, "and they will till it and dwell in it."" (Jer. 27:11)

Jeremiah received this message for the nations surrounding Judah. He would speak it to the diplomats who visited Zedekiah in Jerusalem (probably to plan rebellion against Babylon), and they in turn would carry it home. The prophet was commanded to wear a "yoke" around his neck, similar to the wooden yokes worn by oxen. This word is used about forty times in the Old Testament, usually to refer to servitude and bondage. Jeremiah would be a walking illustration of the bondage these nations would endure by coming under the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar. They were warned to submit and put their neck in the yoke. If they failed to do so they would be destroyed. Notice that the greatest power on earth, a godless nation, is merely God's servant to accomplish his plans.

Jeremiah speaks the same word to Zedekiah.

I spoke words like all these to Zedekiah king of Judah, saying, "Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him and his people, and live! Why will you die, you and your people, by the sword, famine and pestilence, as the LORD has spoken to that nation which will not serve the king of Babylon?" (Jer 27:12-13)

Judah was under Babylon's yoke, which we now see was actually God's yoke. This applied to the Jews still living in Judah, but at this point in history it particularly applied to the exiles who had been forced to march 700 miles from home to live in a land with different customs and language.

As we have seen in earlier studies in this book, believers often behave like the people of Judah in Jeremiah's time. We are prone to sin and idolatry. We "walk after emptiness"; we "dig cisterns that break and cannot hold water." We may not have committed some terrible sin, like murder, but our hearts are fickle and prone to wander. Our devotion to God and our affection for him can become a flickering flame. The result is that we experience discipline, correction and judgment, because God wants to mold and shape us. This can often take the form of yokes and exile. God places us in circumstances that confine and restrict our movements as all of creation becomes his servant to hem us in and get our attention. At times we are sent into exile by being displaced from our homes. On other occasions the exile occurs within us. Eugene Peterson gives an excellent definition of being in exile: "The essential meaning of exile is that we are where we don't want to be. We are separated from home ... It is an experience of dislocation – everything is out of joint; nothing fits together."¹

Our exile may take the form of a physical handicap, a difficult marriage, a demanding employer, a tense work environment, being single, being abandoned by our spouse, a boyfriend or girlfriend breaking off a relationship, having to move to places unknown, or dreams failing to materialize. Do you find yourself in any of these situations? At some point, most of us will experience the feeling of being in exile.

Everything inside us rebels when we feel that yoke around our neck. The ache of being dislocated makes us want to return to Jerusalem. We hate not being in control. We feel limited and cursed. We will try anything to free ourselves and remove the bonds that tie us down. But, God's word to us is, submit and put our neck in the yoke. Don't fight against it, because God means it for good.

**"It is good for a man that he should bear
The yoke in his youth" (Lam 3:27).**

When I first graduated from college, I felt I could do anything I wanted. But too much freedom is not good for me. I become self-consumed and self-absorbed. God began to yoke me with a job, a wife and children. At last I could see that these yokes were good for me. I regarded them as limitations, but God used them for good. My life was more restricted, but that helped me focus on the important things. Instead of my life getting smaller it got larger. Yokes are meant for our good.

While Jeremiah was instructing the people to submit to the yoke of Babylon and exile, false prophets were saying just the opposite. This is why Jeremiah told the people not to listen to these men.

"So do not listen to the words of the prophets who speak to you, saying, 'You will not serve the king of Babylon,' for they prophesy a lie to you; for I have not sent them," declares the LORD, "but they prophesy falsely in My name, in order that I may drive you out and that you may perish, you and the prophets who prophesy to you." Then I spoke to the priests and to all this people, saying, "Thus says the LORD: Do not listen to the words of your prophets who prophesy to you, saying, 'Behold, the vessels of the LORD's house will now shortly be brought again from Babylon'; for they are prophesying a lie to you. Do not listen to them; serve the king of Babylon, and live! Why should this city become a ruin? (Jer 27:14-17)

Here is what one of the false prophets, Hananiah, was saying.

"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel (this is the same formula used by Jeremiah), 'I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. 'Within two years I am going to 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 am also going to bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and all the exiles of Judah who went to Babylon,' declares the LORD, 'for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'" (Jer 28:2-4)

The false prophets promised a quick return from exile. It was only a matter of two years, they said. They promised the return of the temple vessels that were taken to Babylon with Jeconiah; and that the LORD would break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar. Further, they exhorted the people not to submit to or serve the king of Babylon. But the exile would last seventy years. Jerusalem would be destroyed; the remainder of the people of Judah would be killed or taken into captivity; and the rest of the temple vessels would be lost to Babylon.

It is hard enough to submit to the yokes that God places on us, but false prophets and worldly influences that feed us lies make things even more difficult to bear. They tell us we don't have to submit, that we can take control of our own lives. They promise that the exile won't last long and that it won't deter us from doing what we want. They say, break the yoke, take charge of your life, assert your freedom. But it is all lies. The voices of the world try to deceive us and distract us from God's plans.

When Jeremiah confronted the prophet Hananiah, a very interesting thing happened.

Then Hananiah the prophet took the yoke from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet and broke it. Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the LORD, 'Even so will I break within two full years the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations.'" Then the prophet Jeremiah went his way. (Jer 28:10-11)

Notice that Jeremiah did not resist, protest or make a scene. He simply went his way. He knew God was in charge. But later, he received a rebuke from God to pass on to Hananiah:

The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah after Hananiah the prophet had broken the yoke from off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "Go and speak to Hananiah, saying, 'Thus says the LORD, "You have broken the yokes of wood, but you have made instead of them yokes of iron." 'For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "I have put a yoke of iron on the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and they will serve him. And I have also given him the beasts of the field.'" (Jer 28:12-14)

Jeremiah also told Hananiah that he would die, and his word was fulfilled the very same year.

Here is a sobering truth. If we break the yokes of wood, we will get yokes of iron in their place. If we don't submit to the first yoke, God will give us another that is harder and heavier than the first one. If we try to free ourselves and shred the bonds that God places upon us, we will only make things worse for ourselves.

A few days ago our dog maneuvered herself under our kitchen table and got the ring on her choke collar stuck between the slats that form the shelf underneath. In trying to free herself she caused the choke collar to tighten. She even resisted when my wife tried to free her. Eventually Liz was able to free her and prevent her from choking herself to death.

The more we try to free ourselves from the yokes that God places in our lives the more we will tighten the noose around our neck. If we don't submit to the yoke of wood, we will get a yoke of iron.

If yokes are for our good, and if we are to submit to them, how should we live in exile? Here is how Jeremiah instructed the exiles:

"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; and plant gardens and eat their produce. 'Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. 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 have welfare.' "For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your diviners deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream. 'For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them,' declares the LORD. (Jer 29:4-9)

The false prophets of Babylon also claimed to speak for God. They too said the exile wouldn't last long,

spreading discontent as they spoke. The result was that the people just lived from day to day and failed to make commitments or plans. They didn't plant and they didn't build. They weren't going to stay long, they thought. But then they got a letter from Jeremiah exhorting them to build, plant, marry, and seek the shalom of a godless place like Babylon.

What should we do while we are living in exile? We should stop grumbling and feeling sorry for ourselves. We stop should sitting around waiting for the exile to end. Instead, let us accept the situation and believe that the yoke of exile is for our good. We should "build, plant, and dig a trench." We should live as though we will be in Babylon for a long time. Let us give ourselves completely to our jobs. We should add onto our houses, plant bushes in the yard, get involved in our children's schools and get to know our neighbors. We should seek the shalom, the wholeness, the welfare of the place where we are living and not isolate and separate ourselves. We should live to the fullest, trusting the LORD instead of being preoccupied with idle dreams and false promises.

Eugene Peterson comments:

Jeremiah's letter is a rebuke and a challenge: "Quit sitting around feeling sorry for yourselves. The aim of the person of faith is not to be as comfortable as possible but to live as deeply and thoroughly as possible – to deal with the reality of life, discover truth, create beauty, act out love. You didn't do it when you were in Jerusalem. Why don't you try doing it here, in Babylon?"²

Living in exile and putting life on hold has been a dominant theme in my life. It might sound crazy to native Californians, but when I moved here from Nebraska almost 30 years ago, I felt as though I was going into exile. I was dislocated from home to a different culture. The seasons and the landscape were unfamiliar. I thought I would be here for only a short time, perhaps a couple of years. I kept trying to leave. I did not want to settle down here. I promised myself that my children would never attend school in California. They would never go to junior high here. Certainly, they would never go to high school here. Because I felt like an exile, I found it hard to plant or build or settle down. I wasn't going to stay long. But every time I tried to leave, God always made it clear that I was to stay right here. Of course, I have to say that if you are going to be exiled, this is not a bad place to end up in!

Other Nebraskans that I know feel the same way. One friend has lived here for years, but he still subscribes to the Lincoln newspaper. He went to the same high school as my father and my brothers. We talk about Nebraska as if we left it yesterday. It probably has something to do with our German-Russian heritage, our ancestors who came to the Midwest in the late 1800's and early 1900's. My family came to Lincoln and settled down in a place called Hanneman hill. The land is in our blood. So is the football team!

Some years ago I awoke from a dream in a state of anxiety. The message of the dream was that I wasn't living the life I was so supposed to live, although I wasn't sure what that was. I had a choice. Would I believe the lie of the false prophet, the dreamer, or would I plant and build and enter into the life I was given?

Perhaps some of you are thinking along the same lines. You are thinking, this isn't the marriage, the job, the life I as supposed to live. God says, it doesn't matter. Live as though your life, your marriage, your job were the ones you were supposed to have...because they are! You may feel like an exile, but you are living the life God planned for you. It might not be your plan, but it is his. Build a house, plant a garden, go to work, seek the shalom of Cupertino, San Jose, Campbell, or wherever you live.

What will motivate us to build and plant right here, right now? According to the text, God is working out something wonderful in our lives. We have a future and a hope.

“For thus says the LORD, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. ‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.’ (Jer 29:10-14)

There is nothing superficial about God. Two years in exile wouldn't do anything to change Judah. But in seventy years, God could really work. God had a plan, a vision for something good for Judah. When the people returned home, they would call on God. They would seek him and they would find him.

God always works with exiles. Don't envy those who are still in Jerusalem. They might not be as blessed as you think. God changes our hearts in exile. There we learn to depend on him, love him and pray to him. There is where we learn to seek him and give up our ties to this world. All of this takes time. While the yoke remains, we know that God wants to work in us for our good, our shalom. This is not accomplished in the clouds. It is accomplished in the affairs of our everyday lives — getting our hands dirty, building a house, planting a garden, raising a family. The greatest changes take place in the ordinary structures of life.

My family well knows my impractical idealism and

silly sentimentality. On my birthday, my daughter Annie gave me a card that showed two paths diverging in the woods. One was labeled “Your Life,” the other said, “Not An Option.” I have spent much of my life thinking about “not an option.” She wrote:

I saw this card and thought immediately of you! No IFS, remember! We're not to look back on life with regrets ... you never should, because God is always directing us along the right path. And dad, if you ask me, “your life” turned out just wonderful, and I'm so very proud of you! You became all that God intended you to be – a loving, caring husband, a devoted and giving father, and hardworking, faithful preacher of God's word...God has some exciting plans for you, I am sure. So never look back on what is “no longer an option” in your life, because your future is waiting just ahead of you!

I praise God today for the yokes that he has placed in my life. I praise him for exile. I praise him for the life that I have. He had a plan for me that is so much better than any plans of my own.

God has a plan for you, too. It is called “Your Life.” Do not resist the yoke that he has placed on you. Build and plant and seek the shalom of this place. “For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.”

1. Eugene Peterson, *Run With The Horses* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 148.
2. Peterson, *Run With The Horses*, 152.

© 2001 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino