

A Future and a Hope

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[0 : 0 0] Now we are coming once again to the book of Jeremiah. This is our final study at the moment, although we'll be taking up again later. We've come to Jeremiah 29 on page 656. I'm going to read this chapter and I'm also going to read a few verses in the book of Daniel which are totally related to this and I'll be referring to these later. So Jeremiah 29, which brings us to the end of a long section, you'll be glad to know it when we take this book up again. The next chapter is called the book of consolation. There hasn't been an awful lot of consolation, it has to be said, in the previous chapters but we'll come to that. Anyway, these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

This was after King Jeconiah and the Queen Mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. The letter was sent by the hand of Elsassah, the son of Shaphan, and Gemari, the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah, king of Judah, sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. It said, 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 their 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, 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. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, do not let your prophets and your 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, declares the Lord, for thus says the Lord, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the

Lord. I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile. Because you have said, the Lord has raised up prophets for us in Babylon, thus says the Lord concerning the king who sits on the throne of David and concerning all the people who dwell in this city, your kinsmen who did not go out with you into exile. Thus says the Lord of hosts, behold, I am sending on them sword, famine, and pestilence. And I will make them like vile figs that are so rotten that they cannot be eaten.

I will pursue them with sword, famine, and pestilence and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse, a terror, a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them. Because they did not pay attention to my words, declares the Lord, that I persistently sent you by my servants, the prophets. But you do not listen, declares the Lord. Hear the word of the Lord, all you exiles whom I sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel concerning Ahab, the son of Kalliah, and Zedekiah, the son of Meshiah, that's not the king, but a false prophet, who are prophesying a lie to you in my name. Behold, I will deliver them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. He shall strike them down before your eyes. Because of them, this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah in Babylon. The Lord make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire. Because they have done an outrageous thing in Israel. They have committed adultery with their neighbor's wives, and they have spoken in my name lying words, but I did not command them. I am the one who knows, and I am witness, declares the Lord.

To Shemaiah, son of Nehemiah, you shall see. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, you have sent letters in your name to all the people who are in Jerusalem, and to Zephaniah, the son of Meshiah, the priest, and to all the priests, saying, the Lord has made you priest, instead of Jehoiada the priest, to have charge in the house of the Lord over every madman who prophesies, to put him in the stocks and neck irons. Now, why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth, who is prophesying to you? He has sent to us in Babylon, saying, your exile will be long, build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat their produce.

[5 : 24] Zephaniah, the priest, read this letter in the hearing of Jeremiah the prophet. Once again, that's not Zephaniah the prophet, that's a different person. Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, sent to all the exiles, saying, Thus says the Lord concerning Shemaiah of Nehemiah, because Shemaiah had prophesied to you when I did not send him, has made you trust in a lie. Therefore, thus says the Lord, Behold, I will punish Shemaiah of Nehemiah and his descendants.

He shall not have anyone living among this people. He shall not see the good that I will do to my people, declares the Lord, for he has spoken rebellion against the Lord.

If you keep your finger in there, please, and then turn over to page 746, and to Daniel chapter 9. Between Jeremiah 29 and Daniel 9, some 70 years has passed the entire exile, and Daniel is reading these very words of Jeremiah, which we've just read.

So let's read the first three verses of Daniel chapter 9. In the first year of Darius, the son of Ahasuerus, by the center meet, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans.

In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord, to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely 70 years.

[6 : 59] Amen. That is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us. Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at Jeremiah 29, that's page 656, and we'll have a moment of prayer before we look together at the word.

Lord God, as we have sung, we do indeed need your spirit to shed light upon those words which he himself inspired, and to shed light into our darkened hearts.

And we pray, Lord, that is what will happen this evening, that your words will bring a flood of light into our hearts, and shed a flood of light on our onward way. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I think you'll agree with me. One of the things that helps us to keep on going as human beings in tough times is hope of better times.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who, in the months of November and February, think of summer, sunshine, and holidays. I'm talking about genuine hope, not the kind of futile hope that those of us who support Newcastle United hope for every week, that they may win a game.

[8 : 27] I'm talking about genuine hope, the kind of hope that's rooted in the character of God, the kind of hope that gives us something to look forward to.

And, you know, that's at the very, very heart of the story of the Bible, living in the present, in the light of the future. I believe that's what is at the very heart of this chapter we've read, living in the present, in the light of the future.

I've taken my title for this evening from the chapter, from verse 14, A Future and a Hope. That's what we're going to be looking at this evening. It's very interesting how this hope comes here.

We're accustomed to thinking of letters as characteristic of the New Testament. Well, of course, that's true. But here is the first text of a letter in Scripture, a letter sent by Jeremiah the prophet to the exiles in Babylon, telling them that Babylon will come to an end, but also telling them how to live in the present.

You see, like the New Testament letters, of course, he warns against false prophets and false teachers, argues obedience to the Word of God. It's the kind of thing Terry was talking about this morning, the false teachers in the church in Colossae in the first century, who played down the significance of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[9 : 56] And here are the false teachers who are looking for false hopes. This is not genuine hope. I did not send them, says the Lord. So in verse 14, I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place which I sent you into exile.

I will bring you back. That is the future and the hope. One of the great things about the Bible is not just its marvelous unity, but its tremendous diversity.

And when the prophets are speaking, they're obviously, first of all, speaking to their own time. They are speaking to the people of their time and giving them a hope for that time or immediately beyond it.

When the prophets say, I will bring you back, the Lord's words, or the words are read from Jeremiah, I will bring you from all the lands to which I have sent you, it's first and foremost talking about the story we read in Ezra and Nehemiah about how the exiles returned to rebuild, first of all, the temple, then the walls and the city of Jerusalem.

But clearly, that did not fulfill all the prophecies. After all, Isaiah talked about the desert blossoming like the rose. He had talked about the nations coming to Zion, praising the Lord and not studying war anymore.

[11 : 29] He had talked about, and Habakkuk talks about the earth filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. That clearly did not happen then.

That didn't mean that what happened then didn't matter. What happened then was, is it where God's saying, look, I'm going to do this. This isn't the end of the story. This is just a trailer of the main event.

It's very interesting. Throughout Scripture, we have this theme of exile and return. Right from the very beginning, Adam and Eve exiled from Eden.

But there is a way back, because there is going to come one who is simply known as the serpent crusher at that time. And there is going to be a way back to the tree of life.

Then there's the exile down in Egypt, the exodus led by Moses, which points forward to that greater exodus. And then here, the exodus, which is going to happen in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

[12 : 30] If you read these books, you'll find the language that the authors use is the language of exodus. They see this as a new exodus. And 1 Peter talks about God's people as exiles in this world.

The American spiritual says, this world is not my home. I'm just a passing through. That's what Peter says. This is not our permanent home. We are in exile.

We're exiles in the world. So it's not just the return of God's people from Babylon. It's the end of the age and the gathering of all God's people together in the Father's house in the new creation.

Now, I'm going to concentrate on verses 1 to 14 and have it where a couple of footnotes about the rest of the chapter. The material in the rest of the chapter must be, I was going to say, wearisomely familiar to most of us now.

And so I'm not going to dwell on it too much at the moment. But I am going to speak particularly about verses 1 to 14. And I want two main points I want to make.

[13 : 39] First of all, these verses tell us how to live in this world. Verses 1 to 7. And then verses 8 to 14.

How to prepare for the next world. Now, they are totally related, of course. It's not. They're two separate things. They're two sides of the same coin. So first of all, how to live in this world.

Verses 1 to 7. I want you to notice something which is quite interesting. The letter that Jeremiah sends was sent by these guys, high officials.

In other words, it goes in the diplomatic bag. This letter of Jeremiah is not just a private letter. This letter is sent, as I say, in the diplomatic bag. That always seems to be a wonderful picture of the Word of God doing its work in the world.

This is a picture of that in this specific time and place. And in verse 7, Jeremiah says, Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile.

[14 : 43] Pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. Now, Babylon, you'll remember in the New Testament, becomes a symbol.

It's already becoming that. Of the world. What John calls the world. The world which passes away. The world which if we love, the love of the Father is not in us.

Some of you would hear Andy Gemmell's fine sermon on that some weeks ago. So, this is what these verses are about. How do we live in this world? I want to suggest various things that this passage is telling us.

First of all, make a positive contribution to the communities we live in. Seek the welfare of the city. Don't imagine, please, that everyone who is living for the Lord has to be in what we call full-time Christian ministry.

That's a great mistake. Because if we think of that, where are we going to get our Christian teachers from? Our Christian lawyers. Our Christian shopkeepers. Our Christian business people.

[15 : 51] Our Christian doctors. Many of God's people, all of God's people are called to serve him. Are called to ministry. But many of God's people are called to minister in the world.

To seek the welfare of the city. To bring the presence of the Lord right into all these places, the classrooms, the offices, everywhere where we are.

And that fits in the book of Proverbs. The book of Proverbs, which is about living, godly living in this world, wisdom calls out in the streets, in the marketplaces, where people gather.

You see, so often, as Christians, we've, on the one hand, retreated into ghettos. Retreated into ghettos, where we don't know what to say to people.

We've no language to communicate with them. We're so different from them. Or else, become totally indistinguishable from the world. Now, this will vary from place to place and from time to time.

[16 : 49] There are no laws and no rules. But this passage is saying, we will not despise the ordinary good things of life which God gives us gifts.

Notice this verse, build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat their produce. You see, we won't become obsessed by them, but we won't downplay them.

We won't be, we won't retreat into a kind of foolish asceticism like Stimian Stylites, who is reputed to have spent 30 years on the top of a pillar to show how saintly and godly he was.

What the conditions must have been like on the top of that pillar, beggar's imagination. But anyway, that's not what we are called to. We are called to seek the welfare of the places where we are.

It's no accident, actually, that Daniel refers to this chapter because Daniel is the supreme example of this. Daniel was not a minister.

[17 : 52] Daniel was not a missionary. Daniel was not a youth worker. Daniel was not a preacher. Daniel was a high-placed civil servant who worked faithfully and honorably for many decades in the administration of Babylon and then on into Persia, which is where he is reading this chapter.

You see, the fact that the world is passing away doesn't mean we don't play our part in it while we are here. It means two things, I think. It means we realize, first of all, this world is not everything.

Build houses and gardens, which I suppose represent the material good things of life. We recognize that they're not everything. They will pass away. Everything else will pass away.

But it also, I think, importantly underlines the fact that our ultimate destination is the new creation. C.S. Lewis said, God likes matter.

He made it. The new creation is going to be a deeper country, greener grass, bluer sky. It's not going to be a disembodied existence in a shadow land strumming at harps wearing ethereal negligees.

[19 : 07] If that's what it is, count me out. It's going to be a wonderful, glorious, new creation. Vivid, real, where all that is good in this creation will survive.

I think that's what Revelation 21 means when it talks about the kings of the earth bringing their treasure into the city. I don't know if that means it will be a royal Shakespeare theater or not, but I'm allowed to hope.

So, first of all, make a positive contribution to our communities. Secondly, pursue family life. Verse 6, take wives and have sons and daughters.

Take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage. They may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there and do not decrease. Now, that, of course, is the echo of the early chapters, the very first chapter of the Bible, where the human beings are told to do just this.

It doesn't mean, of course, that everybody can do this. We live in a fallen world. But it does mean, if we can, to have children carry on God-honoring patterns of behavior.

[20 : 16] So, I think this is more important than it seems. It may seem very obvious. But surely what it is doing is underlying the God-given pattern of husband and wife and family life.

And surely there is never a day when that was more needed. When we abandon that, there is no saying the depths which society will sink. I'm just reading this week about this thing that's called polyamory, where four or five people live together and have sex with anyone they want.

You know, it's just totally indiscriminate. You see, when we abandon the one man, the one woman in the image of God, in the covenant of marriage, that's the kind of thing it does.

Now, we're not saying, I'm not saying this because we are naturally any better. We're not. When you think of it, every sin, including sexual sins, finds its echo in all our hearts.

What I'm saying is without the grace of God, without the word of God to guide us, we are going simply to go on a gathering rush into an abyss where everything that holds society together simply dissolves.

[21 : 29] And I suppose one of the most terrifying things about this, I've mentioned other things, is that it hardly rates a mention. At one time, this would have been regarded as the terrific scandal.

Now, it just, maybe a bit weird, but, you know, people take it in their stride. Make a contribution. Pursue family life. But I think, I think the third thing, and this is in verse 10, verse 7, seek the welfare of the city.

Continue to pray for and work for people's salvation. Now, where do I get that? The word translated welfare is shalom, a great biblical word that means peace, harmony, which includes all kinds of benefits, security, welfare, all these good things that have been mentioned here, but ultimately, peace with God.

Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. So, what's happening here is, I think, do all these things, but never forget, never, never forget, to pray for and work for the salvation of people.

If I'm right in my interpretation of Daniel 4, the most spectacular example has happened during the exile when King Nebuchadnezzar himself bowed before the King of Heaven, repented, and made his peace with him.

[22 : 53] I mean, that is the most spectacular thing in the book of Daniel, far more wonderful than the blazing furnace and the lions and the beasts out of the sea that the great King of Babylon acknowledged the Lord and acknowledged him in humble repentance.

So, first of all then, how do we live in this world? Now, the rest of the verses, 8 to 14, tell us how to prepare for the world to come. Now, in a sense, we've already answered that, haven't we?

We prepare for it by living as fully the life that God has given us. But you see, the point is the more firmly we believe that one day Christ will return and wind up the affairs of this world and usher in a better one, the more urgent it is to engage in all lawful and worthy activities until he comes.

So often, this has been taken the wrong way. Since he's coming, the world is doomed. We don't do anything. That's not the point. The point is that the more firmly we believe in his return, the harder we will strive to work for him until he comes.

But, more specifically now, Jeremiah is looking beyond the exile to the time of return. In verse 8, he says, you prepare for the world to come, which in this case was the return from exile back to Jerusalem of the temple, the sacrifices and all the things that Moses had given to him.

[24 : 23] And for us, it's preparing for the coming of the Lord. Listen to the true word and not the false prophets. That's one way we prepare for the world to come.

We listen to the voice that comes from that world, the voice which, as our Lord himself says, heaven and earth will pass away, but my word will never pass away.

This continual theme in Jeremiah, as we've seen in the last few chapters, I did not send them. That is the point. These false prophets, the Lord dismisses them, I did not send them.

As we looked at some weeks, how do we know the difference? Now, there's a very close correlation between the effectiveness of the preaching and the carefulness of the listening.

one of the problems that we, sometimes, happens in churches is that people come and sit passively like sheep and think, well, you know, the religious expert is doing the job, we've got to listen and make sure we do it.

[25 : 33] That is absolutely untrue to the biblical revelation. When the gospel is preached, whether it's preached like a lecture like this or it's a one-to-one or a Bible study or a home group or an evangelistic group, what is happening is that the speaker and the listeners together are listening to the Word of God and challenged by it.

A good example of this in Acts chapter 17 where Paul visits a place called Berea and Luke says of the people in Berea, they receive the Word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Let me repeat that. As you listen to Paul, they receive the Word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Now, there's two things here.

First of all is the eagerness to listen to the Word being expounded, which is a sign of spiritual hunger, isn't it? A hunger to be fed on Christ. But also, realizing that we have to read the Bible for ourselves if we're going to get the most of it.

It's surely no accident that it is churches where there's a strong pulpit ministry where all kinds of Bible study groups grow up, where people become interested in reading the Bible for themselves and studying the Bible, talking about it, living it.

[27 : 00] And that's tremendous responsibility for both preacher and hearer, isn't it? A preacher knows he's got it desperately wrong.

If somebody goes away and says, well, he's such a clever guy, I could never see that, I could never do that. What ought to be happening is people say, I can do that myself. Why didn't I see that before?

In other words, it's not simply passive listening, it's active listening, actively together exploring it. That's the first thing.

listen to the word of God, the word which will not only help us to live in this world, but prepare us for the next. Secondly, realize that the time belongs to the Lord.

Now, here the time is specified, verse 10, for thus says the Lord, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

[28 : 01] Now, Jeremiah said that several times, and isn't it fascinating that 70 years later, Daniel reads these words and realizes the time has come. I mean, I find that one of the most moving things of all.

Daniel, himself, by then, a very old man, towards the end of his life, reading these words of Jeremiah, spoken to apparent, well, not just apparent, spoken to absolute ridicule and disbelief, 70 years before, and now they're coming true.

70 years is a long time, but look what it produced, the prophet Daniel and the prophet Ezekiel. If we hadn't had the exile, we wouldn't have had these tremendous books with all they have to teach us.

Now, we don't know the time. We don't know how long it will be before the Lord returns. Maybe he will return in the lifetime of some people in this room.

Maybe it will be hundreds, even thousands of years. Remember at the beginning of Acts, the Jesus follower says, Lord, are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

[29 : 13] It's interesting what Jesus says to them. He doesn't say you're talking nonsense. What he says in effect is you haven't understood just how big a thing the kingdom is.

The kingdom is going to be restored to Israel, but not ethnic Israel in a tiny country by the Mediterranean. He says, it is not for you to know the times and the seasons, but you will be my witnesses where Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, and then the kingdom will come.

The kingdom will come and we are called to the service of that kingdom. We don't know when. That's why I remember in some of the parables and in the so-called Apocalypse, all a bit discourse of just before Jesus dies, he says, keep watching because you don't know when he is going to come.

And the time is going to be long. That's the point, surely, of the parable of the talents. The master went away for a long time into a distant country.

So, listening to the word of God, realizing the time does not depend on us, but on the Lord. In verse 12, seeking the Lord, you will seek me and find me when you seek me with all my heart.

[30 : 36] That's intimately related to hearing his voice. With all your heart, it means loving him and following him. Not just following him out of a sense of duty, but loving him.

Loving him and he says, I will be found when you seek me with all your heart. That does not mean for one moment.

The Lord says, if you don't seek me, I'm jolly well not going to seek you. What it means is the Lord is saying, unless you seek me, you won't realize how much I want you, how anxious I am that you hear my voice.

And the fourth thing is trusting him to do what he promised. That's verse 14. I will restore your fortunes. I will bring you back.

It's very important to notice that it's I who's going to do this. Not I'm going to raise up some great leader who is going to defeat the Babylonian empire and bring you back and then Jerusalem will be a superpower.

[31 : 43] No, I will bring you back. I think as we live in this world, as we prepare for the next, we need to remember this. The work is not our work.

It's God's work. You never guess that when you look at most church websites. Always how friendly churches are. Always how wonderful we are and how many activities.

I'm longing someday to see a church website which has on it the words of John Wesley, I offered Christ to them. Remember, that's all we have to offer to the world.

A footnote on the rest of the chapter. There will always be powerful voices urging the other way. And actually, it seems to me to be the point of this.

These guys, you see, there's false prophets in Babylon as well. This guy, verse 21, Ahab and Zedekiah, they are prophesying falsely.

[32 : 47] It's interesting, actually, verse 22, the Lord makes you like Zedekiah and Ahab whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire. Cannot read that without remembering Daniel 3 and the servants of the Lord whom God prevented from being destroyed in the fire.

There are powerful voices speaking the other way, and these voices are going to prove to be false, but they are very, very seductive. We tend to be short-term, don't we?

We like, I mean, we like things yesterday. We want to jam immediately and all the time. What Jeremiah is saying is the end is certain, but the way to it will be tough.

Just as mentioning Proverbs again, wisdom calls out in the streets, so does folly, and the thing is they sound exactly alike. They use the same vocabulary, they invite you to their parties, and it needs wisdom to discern them.

But you see, what Jeremiah is saying, there's only one safe way, and that is to learn how to live in this world, learn how to prepare for the world to come. There will always be times, there will be tough times.

[34 : 07] There will be rejoicing as well, there will be times of sunshine, times of darkness, there will always be battles won, but there will always be struggling in the fight.

And that's going to go on until the end, but the end is certain. And what is the end? God will be God, and the world will know it.

Amen. Let's pray. Amen. God, our Father, we are so ready to listen to the voices of folly, which find such a ready echo in our own hearts and in our own hormones.

And so we pray, Lord, that you will help us to hear the voice, the voice of the Son of God, the voice that wakes the dead, the voice that protects, the voice that judges, and the voice that saves.

And help us as we continue our pilgrimage to look to the home at the end when we are struggling in the night. And we ask this in Jesus' name.

[35 : 16] Amen. Amen. Amen.