

Seeking Peace and Prosperity; and we're reading from Jeremiah 29 and from verse 4 to 11

[Reading Jeremiah 19:4-11] Amen.

"For I know the plans I have for you, to give you hope and a future" - A very, very famous scripture; I once tried to give that to somebody, young person, as a baptism, and I was told I couldn't do that because the promise wasn't for them, the promise and passage are for the Israelites who were taken into exile in Babylon (so I had to find another verse). So I've thought a lot about that since and I've come to the conclusion that they were wrong not let me do that. This whole passage, as so much of scripture, encapsulates the message of the Gospel - it's all there, it's fantastic. Now the reading is a record from the Lord given to the prophet Jeremiah for the people of the southern tribes of Israel who had been taken into exile in Babylon, but it's also for us.

We so often like to attribute the bad things which happen to us as having been caused by the enemy, whether the devil or people. But the difficult truth of the situation that the Judeans found themselves in, is that the situation they were in had been caused by the Lord: the scripture says "I carried you into exile in Babylon." He brought them into exile - it wasn't the Babylonians, the Lord had sent them into exile. As challenging a truth this might be for us, and it is a challenge in truth because when bad things happen to us, we don't like to think that God has anything to do with it. But how can anything that happens in the world, how can anything that happens in the universe, not have anything to do with God? He knows everything.

So something bad has happened we can't be like petulant teenagers and say (and though we often do): Why is this bad thing happening to me? You can ask him when you see him in glory - many of the Judeans probably will. The obvious answer we might say is the Judeans were taken into exile in Babylon because they had been bad, so God was punishing them. But later in the text it says that the seventy years were for Babylon.

Now sometimes when bad things happen to us, it's got nothing to do with us. We might find ourselves in a situation, we might find ourselves when we're sick and we find ourselves in hospital, and it's because we've been put in that hospital to witness the gospel to somebody who's there, and we wouldn't have been there had we not been injured or sick. The Judeans, the people of Israel, would not have been in Babylon had God not sent them there, and we read a number of times in scripture of Daniel, Shadrack, Meshack, Abednego, Jeremiah - possibly countless other conversations of witnesses that the Judeans gave to the people of Babylon about the God of Israel, the creator of everything, which they would not have done had God not sent them to exile. You might think I'm wrong, but it's the conclusion I've come to.

God is sovereign. God is sovereign over our good times and our bad times, he's sovereign over our trials and our triumphs; he holds our times and our futures in his hands. And his plans and purposes will always exceed anything we can think or imagine. In 2015 I suddenly became afflicted with hyperthyroidism. Hypothyroidism is when the hormones decrease in your body and your body starts to shutdown; hyperthyroidism is the opposite: my heart suddenly shot up to rate of about 120 beats a minute, I was losing weight, I was eating packets of doughnuts by the pound and still losing weight because my body was just ramped up - it was like throwing gasoline onto a fire. But it was also around that time that I started to study. Started to study first of all teaching English as a foreign language, and the course I went on was really difficult, really intense. And

then after that I started to study Theology, and, honestly, I left school with four GCSEs. I wasn't very smart. And I don't know whether or not I would have been able to rise up to the standard that was required at Spurgeon's College had I not had hyperthyroidism, 'cause I couldn't sleep and I was constantly thinking, constantly active, constantly working, and it meant I was able to actually do some of the work that was taught. I was up nights and was going to do? So I suddenly started reading and doing the essays. Stephanie, a few weeks ago, was talking about how she didn't have enough time because she's trying to study to pass her lawyers exams; and I'm not going to say I want to pray for Stephanie to get hyperthyroidism, but, you know, God works in mysterious ways, doesn't he?

If we go to verse 5 and verse 6 where it talks about building houses, settling down, marrying and multiplying – it's a clear echo of the creation mandate to humanity. It's a repeat of that: subdue the earth, build houses, plant gardens, multiply, marry, have sons and daughters, let your sons and daughters marry that they may have sons and daughters. It indicates that the purposes, the plans and purposes, of the Lord haven't changed in anyway. The plans and purposes of the Lord hadn't changed for the people of God when they were in Babylon, just because they weren't in Jerusalem any more. When we find ourselves in hard times, the plans and purposes of God still haven't changed. They're still the same regardless of our situation. So what do we do?

God's people. God's people: believers in his goodness, believers in his gospel (his good news). We as his representatives on earth are not directed to pray *against*, but rather to pray for the improvement of the world in which we find ourselves. Because it is evil: the days are evil, the ages are evil, many of the structures in our society are evil. So what do we do? We pray that they would be improved. An alternative translation is "not because if it prospers you too will prosper, but in its welfare you will find your welfare." I mean, how true is that for us now in a world where there's so much violence – would we not have more welfare if there was less violence in the world? Of course we would! Therefore that's what we need to pray for.

Think of the passage in Luke 9:54 when the Sons of Thunder, James and John, asked if they could rain down fire from heaven on a Samaritan village because it hadn't properly prepared for the disciples as they were coming. Jesus didn't say: "Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's a great idea – rain down fire from heaven on them" did he? He rebuked them for that. The reason is because the enemies of the Lord are not people: the days might be evil, the structures of society might be evil – it might be idolatry. But the enemies of God are not people. Every single human being on this earth carries the image of God. The enemies of the Lord are not people, they're Principalities and Powers; that's what Paul says: we don't range war against flesh and blood, we wage war against Principalities and Powers.

Peace and prosperity will never be achieved by setting people against people – that's war. Peace is achieved by discerning the influence of satanic, demonic forces on the world in which we live, and the people in the world, and then coming together with our weapons of warfare, with prayer (intercessory prayer), with worship, with the Word of God, and praying against these forces. What does Jesus pray when he prays to his father in John 17? He says I do not pray that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. If when we're saved, the whole purpose is just the we go to heaven, he'd take us straight away but it's not. He doesn't pray that we're taken out the world – we're in the world for a reason. The world needs us!

In verse 8 it talks about false prophecy. And it's important for us to acknowledge falsehood in prophecy still exists, and is still widespread today. It talks about diviners, divination, and imagination. A lot of prophecy, a lot of what people claim to say in the name of the Lord is

divination and imagination – it comes from the human heart, it doesn't come from the Spirit – and it can be distinguished from genuine prophecy (and we're taught this in scripture in Deuteronomy). Genuine prophecy is that which originates from the Word of God, and we know that it's true because it comes to pass. It's also what is in accordance with the Word of God. Now some people will prophesy and they'll use the Word of God in a matter for which wasn't intended. So that's why I say: the Word of God used in accordance with the Word of God, in accordance with the character and purposes of God as revealed in Scripture. And it's vital that we know the difference because many people will come and they will try to tell you that something that is happening is God's will, and it's not God's will – it might be their will. You might try and say something's going to happen, but it's not God's will, it's your will.

His thoughts are higher than our thoughts, his ways are higher than our ways. Even Jesus, the Son of God on the earth, when he was in the Garden of Gethsemane said: “Not my will – not my will – but yours.”

People will say a lot of things and claim that a lot of things are true, and claim that they know the character of God – “God is so good he couldn't possibly allow that to happen” – they don't know, they don't know God's thoughts. Be very very careful when someone comes to you and tells you that something is in the name of the Lord – check it! Check it – you're told to do that. Test it. The true Word of the Lord we have in verse 10. The true Word of the Lord is that the people needed to wait 70 years. Do you think there were people in that time who were coming and saying – they were false prophets and they were coming and saying – to the people of Israel: “Yeah, he's going to take us back next week”, “He's going to take us back in a year”, “He's going to take us back on this date, that date.” The true Word of the Lord was that 70 years! Generations! Some people who were taken there were going to die there. There were never going to see their home again.

That kind of prophecy isn't welcomed, but it's a true prophecy. This is why Jeremiah was a prophet who was thrown in pits and locked up in stocks; but he was one who spoke the true Word of God, and it's not always what people want to hear.

False prophets, false preachers, will come and they will tell you things you want to hear. Be very suspicious when somebody who's preaching is only telling you things you want to be true. We should compare the situation: they were called to wait, they were called to wait 70 years – they were called to wait and wait and wait. We, in our situation, would like everything that's bad to just change, to go away overnight. But we're called to wait and to endure – we're called to wait and to endure. And we're called to be faithful as we wait and we endure. So what do we do? We pray for and seek the prosperity of the place in which we live – this city, wherever we find ourselves. What do we mean when we speak of Peace and prosperity?

Martin Lloyd Jones was a pastor, he was a reverend of a chapel – Westminster Chapel (it's in London). He said this in his biography: “I experienced a growing concern for others. I used to be struck almost dumb sometimes in London at night when I stood watching cars passing, suddenly realising that what all this meant was that these people were looking for peace – peace from themselves.” Peace from themselves. If you don't have peace in yourself, you can be taken to the most beautiful place on earth and you still won't be at peace. We speak, and we preach, a gospel of peace; our feet are shod with the gospel of peace: how beautiful on the mountain are those who speak good news.

Believers who give an allegiance to the gospel – as I hope – are called to form supportive, corrective, ethical, moral communities to stand as did, and as does, God with the victims in our

communities, because the church is an instrument for serving and saving the wider culture. The church is an instrument for serving and saving the wider culture. Do you know that the church does not have the Spirit; the Spirit has a church. I'll say that again: the church does not have the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit has a church. We belong to the Holy Spirit. We belong to the Holy Spirit. Our purpose on this earth is the Holy Spirit's purpose: it's to glorify Jesus Christ. And we do that by finding the people who don't have peace in themselves and preaching to them the gospel of reconciliation: the gospel that reconciles them to God and to other people. That's why the disciples are in the world but not of it. Because we are citizens of heaven, and yet we're in the world, so we can bring the peace of heaven to the world. You can bring the peace of heaven into the heart of somebody who has no peace; and you do that by telling them about Jesus. It's easy, really.

This truth that we're in the world but not of the world is vital because it gives us a freedom which is based upon, and provides for us, critical independence from the world. We can stand in the world and yet have a view which is apart from the world. When there's violence in the world, we exchange that violence which is willingly and knowingly violating the dignity, or the physical or psychic integrity of a person (that's violence, whether it's physical or mental) we exchange that for non-violence. We intentionally renounce any intention to cause harm. That's what it means when your feet are shod with the gospel of peace.

It's important for us to realise seizing leaders of power to enforce change, doesn't in any way correspond with Christ's form of sacrificial servant leadership. Our intention should not be to seize the leaders of power – we are apart from the world. So how can a church effect a change and exercise power in Jesus' name?

Our visible corporate worship – when we worship together, whether in this house or away from this house – is a source of continuous renewal to the city and to the world. And the preached word of truth, whether proclaimed from the stage here or in conversation or action wherever we go, wherever any of us go away from here; the preached word of truth whether in conversation or in action is what unmasks powers. Unmasks powers which seek to enslave the hearts and minds, and is what strips the peace away from those who are made in God's image. Our purpose is to reinstate that. In this way, the church of Christ – us – we possess power, the power and authority, to recreate the world from the bottom up – never from the top down, from the bottom up. Power belongs to God. It's exercise cannot of itself be wrong, but it's too often used wrongly. The church is therefore called to disavow itself of attempts to seize power, but instead to demonstrate that we have a kingdom that's not of this world. And we do this by engaging in conscientious participation and conscientious objection, all in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.