

The story of Jeremiah, like Noah’s story, is a story of disaster before it becomes a story of hope. **The letter Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon was God’s word on the subject of hope which said that the Lord had a plan and because of the Lord’s plan, God’s people had “hope and a future.”** When finally, Judah had no hope, at least no hope in their own ability to save themselves, then the word of the Lord through Jeremiah became their only word of hope.

Few lives in the Bible are as fascinating and at the same time as elusive as the life of Jeremiah. The problem with Jeremiah is that we know more about his prophecy than we know about his life. We also have difficulty figuring out the arc of Jeremiah’s life, since most of his prophecies are undated. What we are constantly asking is: When did Jeremiah speak this word? What was going on?

Yet, there seems to be a discernible trajectory to the life of Jeremiah. We are told that he began to prophesy in the thirteenth year of Josiah. That year would be around 627 B.C. Those were critical years in ancient Judah. After years of Assyrian domination, it appeared that the oppression hanging over Judah was lifting. A great revival broke out under Josiah. 2nd Kings 22 and 23 narrates this revival. The revival of ancient Israelite religion was accompanied by a new sense of destiny for Israel. God and country can be a very potent combination.

In this complex political world Jeremiah heard the call of God. He was given a word from the Lord—a terrible word, a word of judgment and disaster. Assyria wouldn’t be the last of the oppressors. Other armies would come, most notably the Babylonians, and Judah would be destroyed. The sad song Jeremiah sang reminds me of the 1976 hit by the rock band Boston, titled, “More Than a Feeling.” *I looked out this morning and the sun was gone. Turned on some music to start my day. I lost myself in a familiar song. I closed my eyes and I slipped away. It’s more than a feeling. When I hear that old song they used to play. I begin dreaming. ‘Til I see Marianne walk away. I see my Marianne walkin’ away.* But instead of Marianne, it is the LORD who is walking away!

The prophet continually and insistently spoke of coming doom, so that in chapter 20 of *The Message* Bible it was said of him: “*There goes old ‘Danger-Everywhere. ’Shut him up! Report him!*” The kings and officials tried to shut him up. They put him in stocks, mocked him, imprisoned him, threw him in a cistern, and cut up his writings—to no avail. He couldn’t be stopped because he was the prophet of the Lord. His name in Hebrew means, “*the Lord lifts up.*”

What we clearly see is that the words Jeremiah spoke came true. It happened in stages, each worse than the previous one. In 609 B.C. Josiah died trying to stop the Egyptian Pharaoh from reinforcing the Assyrian army. In 598 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar’s troops arrived to punish Judah for its role in a rebellion. In 587 B.C. the Babylonians burnt down Jerusalem, demolished the temple, and hauled away the ancient temple furnishings along with many of the top citizens of Jerusalem. They put out the eyes of the king and left Judah in the hands of a governor. It seemed the end of all that Judah ever was or hoped to be.

If the story of Jeremiah has a word of the Lord for us, that word is “*Out of despair comes hope; out of disaster comes new life; out of failure comes freedom.*” Judah could not be put back together again—not in the same way. But God blessed his people. God blessed them in Babylon and in Jerusalem. They learned new ways to be the people of God; the way of the Book instead of the way of the Land; the way of the Rabbi instead of the Prophet; the way of the synagogue instead of the Temple. **Realism and hope is what we 21st century Christian people will find in Jeremiah’s story.** And we need both. Without Jeremiah’s gritty realism, we grab on to “false hope,” hope as we define it, you might say. Without Jeremiah’s God-centered hope, we despair.

Have you noticed that hiking has become one of America’s most popular sports? Hiking has the thrill of conquering nature, the pioneer spirit of living off the land, and a sense of real accomplishment. There are some climbers, however, whose stories tell a different tale. When hikers are lost the National Park System dispatches highly trained search and rescue teams that were featured on a TV special recently. Their hope is to retrieve the lost and

bewildered before it's too late. Sadly, eleven percent of their searches end in fatalities. Of those deaths, three out of four hikers died within 48 hours of becoming lost.

Author Laurence Gonzales notes that when small children—six and under—get lost in the woods they almost never meet with disaster, like the Sto-Rox kindergarten student who was eventually found hiding in plain sight. It's ironic that the ones you'd think would be most vulnerable have the highest survival rate. Children, unlike adults, operate only in their field of vision; they follow their instincts better. When they're cold, they find shelter; when they're thirsty, they drink. Adults who get lost say things like, "There's supposed to be a lake here. Oh well, maybe it dried up." Rescuers call this "*bending the map.*" Postulating erroneous conclusions won't make them true, but people panic. Confused hikers have been known to abandon supplies, or completely disrobe, or jump off a cliff in a fit of total disorientation. Being lost is no picnic.

The same is true for people who are spiritually lost. Somewhere along life's trail, these hikers made faulty conclusions based on poor map reading. **That's why God has appointed the church as members of his search and rescue team.** He strategically sends us to find those who have lost their way. Mind you, God already left them a complete survival guide. But in their confusion, people who are lost tend to panic.

Paul wrote to the Romans: "*They become futile in their thoughts...they exchange the glory of the immortal God for an imitation image of a mortal man*" (1:22-23). And as a result, they disintegrate psychologically. They cling to a solution that could never solve their difficulty and unless these lost hikers are found they will "*die in their sins.*" In part, I think that is why Jesus said we must become "*as little children.*" Children, as a rule, want to be found!

Our assignment and our calling as followers of Jesus is to search and rescue the wandering souls—to give them hope, a God-centered hope, like Jeremiah did. There is much at stake. It's a matter of life and death. Let's again take into account the words of hope that Jeremiah received from the Lord: "*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. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to 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 (vv. 11-14).

A question you just might be asking is this: Is Jeremiah 29 a promise given to me as a Christian? Yes! I believe Christians can claim these words of hope from the prophet, and we can do it because of Jesus Christ. Here is the way I see it fitting together. God spoke a promise through Jeremiah in verses 11-14. If we go back to the opening of this chapter, we will find in verse 1 that they are in Babylon. The letter explicitly addresses the exiles in Babylon. Seventy years will pass but *hope and a future* are coming for them. So, we Christians—Gentiles especially—hear this promise and love it, because it holds out the prospect not of destruction, but of life and hope and joy for us in the future.

Indeed, we can do this because at the Last Supper, Jesus lifted the cup that represented the forgiveness of sin, and said, “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood*” (1 Corinthians 11:25). When he said that, he assured his friends that, “When I die tomorrow and shed my blood on behalf of you, my people, I am securing for you and all believers the new covenant promises that God has made.” That’s us too. Remember that you and I are New Covenant people!

Everything that God meant to be fulfilled for his people Israel is going to be fulfilled through people of the New Covenant. This means that not only Jews but also Gentiles, through faith in God’s Messiah, become part of the covenant people of God, so that every promise can be laid hold of by us Gentiles who have put our faith in the Lord Jesus.

We also know this because of the remarkably affirmative verse in 2 Corinthians 1:20 where Paul says, “*For no matter how many promises God has made, they are YES in Christ.*” I think this echoes the theological truth behind Romans 8:32 which says: “*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, [because of this sacrifice] graciously*

give us all things?" The new covenant includes all the promises that God made to his covenant people throughout salvation history. So I view the flow of redemptive history as coming to a climax in Jesus, who purchased the promises of the Old Testament for all those who are in him as the head of the new covenant people. Indeed, I love Jeremiah 29 verse 11 and I lay hold of it, not as a 6th century B.C. Judean exiled to Babylon for 70 years, but as a 21st century Gentile saved by God's grace. I believe that Jesus extends this prophetic promise to me and he has guaranteed this promise for me.

I've always loved the story about a little boy who's trying to learn the Lord's Prayer, and one night as he knelt by his bed, these words came out:

Our Father, who art in heaven, How do you know my name?

Such individualized affection will always remain a mystery to us mortals. It is essential not to forget that we're all made in the image of God by the power of the extraordinary love of God for each one of us. Doing what Jesus did in loving every one of us, he forever comes to us as if there were no one else in the whole world. This kind of personalized attention is the ideal toward which we should reach, even if it practically speaking remains beyond our grasp.

I know that this astoundingly individualized personal attention from the God of all the universe sounds a bit far-fetched. Yet in the very beginning of Jeremiah's story God says to him: "*Before I shaped you in the womb, I knew all about you. Before you saw the light of day, I had holy plans for you: The prophet to the nations—that's what I had in mind for you*" (Jeremiah 1:5, *The Message Bible*). This is how Jeremiah's story begins. We will soon see how it ends.

Christian friends, Jeremiah's letter is not written only to the exiles in Babylon. It is a word of the Lord today for us too. As I mentioned earlier this word of the Lord means this: "*Out of despair comes hope; out of disaster comes new life; out of failure comes freedom.*" **Realism and hope are what we 21st century Christians find in Jeremiah's story.** And we desperately need them both! Amen.