



good shepherd
presbyterian church

I'd Have Had to Miss the Dance

Jeremiah 29:10-11

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*And now I'm glad I didn't know
The way it all would end, the way it all would go
Our lives are better left to chance
I could have missed the pain
But I'd have had to miss the dance*

I'm not a huge country music fan, but I enjoyed Garth Brooks back in the day, and this is the chorus of one of those songs, "The Dance." There's something about it that came to my mind when I read today's text in Jeremiah. Garth sings about suffering and loss, but reflects at the end that there was also meaning and purpose to that loss. And unlike Garth's lyric about leaving our lives to chance, we believe that our lives are in God's hands. All the more reason to not miss out what God might be doing in the midst of suffering or loss.

Let's look at our text for today, which includes the well-known verse about plans and a future and a hope – what I call the graduation mug verse. And let's see what it was that God did not want His people to miss.

God's Plans

Verse 11 begins, "For I know the plans that I have for you..." When we see that on a coffee mug, it is easy to import our own plans into that rather than ask "What plans, Lord?" In the context of Jeremiah 29, those plans include the seventy years in Babylon (v.10). Those plans include *shalom* (welfare), a future, and a hope. Let's consider each of those in this context:

Seventy Years in Babylon

When Jeremiah was writing this, he and the Exiles were still at the front end of the seventy years. And he's already unpacked for his readers what that seventy years will entail. It's not going to end quickly, despite false prophecies to the contrary. God has brought them here intentionally, to teach them about faithfulness and obedience. During the generations-long stay, God expects them to LIVE: to build homes, plant gardens, have families, and multiply. This was how they were supposed to live all along, but they would only rediscover that here in Exile! And perhaps hardest of all to fathom, they were to seek and pray for the *shalom* of their captors.

Shalom/Welfare

We talked about *shalom* at length several weeks ago. It is variously translated as welfare, prosperity, peace, and blessing. It describes being right with God and with humanity. It's not something to hoard, but something to share! And that's just what God seems to want to teach His people, the "children of blessing." It is in seeking the welfare of the Babylonians that God's people would discover and experience it for themselves.

Verse 11 also says God's plans are for *shalom/welfare* and not for calamity. It certainly would have been easy to think that losing everything and being brought captive to Babylon was calamity. But God is making clear that things are not out of control, but within His plan and purpose. And that purpose is extending *shalom* to the Babylonians and restoring *shalom* to His people.

Future and a Hope

Verse 11 also describes God's plans for a "future and a hope." This future and hope are spelled out in verse 10: "I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place." God has not abandoned them (God is actually speaking to them NOW), and God will bring them home, but it will be after the period of Exile. Taken altogether, it becomes clear that God's plan is for His people to rediscover who they are and what it means to be a "blessing people." That's their future; that's God's plan for them! And that is something they apparently needed to learn in Babylon.

The Dance

Throughout this series I've been comparing parts of the Exile to our experience with COVID over almost a year now. I do want to remind you again that I am not saying God brought COVID on the world in the same way that He sent his covenant people into Exile. Nor does any personal loss or suffering you may have experienced mean that God is pushing or disciplining you.

What I do want to highlight is that God doesn't go away when things get tough. Remember Psalm 23:4? "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me." Being abandoned by God was probably the root fear for the Exiles; but God spoke clearly through Jeremiah. God WAS still with them, on mission and desiring to bless them!

We've talked about how everything has changed, but nothing has changed. Everything has changed with respect to our context: relationships, work, school, income, health, freedoms. But nothing has changed in terms of God being with us and us being able to serve God in obedience and faith. So the question 11 months into COVID is not whether God has forgotten us (He hasn't!) but: ***How can I serve God in obedience and faith?***

It's the same question we should have been asking before COVID. It's the same question Christians in China or Nigeria or England or Charlotte should be asking. That service may look different because our contexts have changed, but the core question remains the same. God is with us! God is for us! And God invites us to follow Him through Jesus Christ and scripture. How will we serve? Who will we bless?

Maybe that's digging back in to your prayer life. There are so many ways to pray and prayer can deepen our own faith as well as bless others.

Maybe that's digging back into the study of God's Word. Again, there are so many ways to read and study scripture, and it will transform your faith and life if you learn and trust God's Word.

Maybe it's reaching out by phone or e-mail or text (or Zoom or Instagram or Facebook or Twitter!) But ask yourself who you might bless and reach out and do it!

Maybe it's a special note of encouragement to your children's teachers or a police officer or medical worker. Maybe it's making a simple meal for someone who is homebound or living alone. Maybe it's getting out to walk in your neighborhood and taking seriously the challenge from Jeremiah to seek and pray for the welfare of the city, starting with your own neighbors and neighborhood.

The main thing is to remember that God has not turned away from us and is not on pause. God is alive and moving and working in the world even now, perhaps even *especially* now! Join me today and this week in asking: ***How can I serve God in obedience and faith?***

I don't want to miss that dance!