



שלום • Shalom • Peace

Jeremiah 29:1-14

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In these opening months of 2020, we are looking at some of the ancient Hebrew and Greek words that have, over the past couple millennia, taken on very different meanings and uses in our English language, and in our modern day theology. In an effort to claim a more faithful understanding of the Biblical text, and its call to faithful discipleship, we are going back to the linguistic roots to identify a renewed call to faithfulness in this new decade.

This morning, we turn to the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, and we explore a word that has created one of the greatest perversions of the Biblical text in our modern day witness of God's will.

When I was growing up as a young teenager in the church, we used to have Bible drills at our youth group events. Have you ever heard of this? ... Bible drills are where the leader calls out a Biblical text, and your goal in response is to flip through the Bible as quickly as possible to locate the verse. The purpose of the Bible drills, at least as I recall it, was not to teach us what the Bible had to say, but to simply help us learn the order of the books of the Bible. Because the purpose of this activity was not to learn what the Bible had to say – we weren't studying any passage at length, or in any context – the passages that were called out were always singular verses.

For example, the leader would call out, "1 Samuel 2:22" ... and we'd immediately begin flipping through the pages. Once someone found the passage, they'd call out, "I go it!" And then they'd read the passage out loud to confirm they had, indeed, found the right passage. Whoever found the right passage first would get some kind of reward or prize – a pack of candy, or a bookmark – and we'd move on to the next passage.

We did this often at youth meetings, and it did help us learn the order of the books of the Bible. It also gave us the opportunity to hear a lot of Biblical passages out of context, left to our teenage imagination as to what the text might mean for our young, but inquiring, minds. Activities such as these Bible drills helped me learn and memorize a number of Biblical passages, even if in isolation. Passages such as Psalm 34:3, which says, "O Magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together." Or Joshua 1:9, which offers, "Do not be frightened or dismayed, but be strong and courageous, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Or the easy passages like Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth ..." Or John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Or the more popular, John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life."

Of all the singular passages we read, there was one we all really liked. It is a passage that I have had memorized since I was but a pre-teen – one of the first Bible verses I ever memorized. It is found in our text for this morning, in Jeremiah 29:11. As I learned it, from the NIV translation, the passage reads, “For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you; plans to give you hope and a future.” What young, moderately wealthy, academically and athletically successful privileged kid would not want to buy into this promise?

Better yet, why would *anyone* not like this passage? The passage says what we all want to hear – that the Creator God – the Lord of the universe – the omnipresent and all-powerful – the God who redeems us and continues to sustain us – this Lord desires nothing for us but prosperity and health, and in this pursuit, gives us a hope and a future.

If you read Jeremiah 29:11, and *do not read* the rest of the book, it should come as no surprise that you could believe that what this text is saying is that what God wants for *you* is to have prosperity in this life. This is a hope and a desire for *a whole lotta people!* And Jeremiah 29:11 isn't the only verse that, when read in isolation, supports this kind of God-sworn prosperity. Haggai 2:9 says, “The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts.” Or Proverbs 3:1-2, which offers, “My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring your peace and prosperity.”

If you read any such text in isolation, or if a preacher lifts these verses up as authoritative in and of themselves, it should be of little surprise that a preacher could proclaim that, “God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us.” Given the individualism and capitalism that defines our society, it's of little surprise that people flock to this kind of teaching. There are many preachers who profit off this kind of doctrine – teaching that what God desires most for you is perfect health – extreme wealth – a lucrative and successful career – a large and well-furnished home – a shiny new car – and so on, and so on, and so on.

This kind of teaching doesn't just change the way we see God, it also affects how we see ourselves, and others around us in the community. It's this kind of teaching that leads us to believe that because we have been faithful, God has “blessed” us. As if our wealth and well-being are a blessing, and the lack of wealth, or lack of well-being of others, is a curse that has befallen them because of their unfaithfulness. So as to say that if I have never been diagnosed with a terminal illness, that is a sign of my faithfulness; while the terminal diagnosis of another is a sign of unfaithfulness. Such a reading doesn't just hurt our relationship with God, it hurts our ability to be in relationship with one another.

This is just another example of how the Biblical text has been edited to fit the preferred theology of the privileged that supports one's *personal* desires, and defends (what are often) abusive business practices. To correct this, let's explore this passage in Jeremiah, looking deeper at the Hebrew text, to seek a more faithful understanding of God's will for each of us, and for all of us.

In Jeremiah 29:11, the word that is translated as “prosperity,” or in other translations, “wealth” or “well-being,” is the Hebrew word *shalom*.

Shalom.

“Shalom – mostly translated into English as “peace” – is a wildly embracing reality in Hebrew that holds together multiple forces of wellbeing.”ⁱ Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, we find this word used anytime the text is referring to the greater well-being of the whole of the community. The word *peace*, though offering our best attempt at a faithful translation, misses the deeper nuances of the word *shalom* in the Hebrew context. The word *prosperity* is, at best, a perversion of the word, fit for a world and a church run by the dominant culture whose vision of peace looks like their own well-being, but often ignoring the well-being of the rest of the community. Widening our look at the text starts to bring this promise of shalom into better focus.

The proximate context in which this verse is found in Jeremiah immediately begins to break down the idea *personal* prosperity, for which this verse is usually read to promise.

Who is speaking in this text? To whom are they speaking? What is the situation in which this promise is being made?

The title of the book points us in the right direction: this text is part of a letter written by Jeremiah to the Israelites who have been exiled to Babylon around 600 BCE. In verse 1, we read, “These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, who Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.” He’s writing to a people who have been taken from their homeland – who have been stripped from their homes, removed from their jobs, and in some cases, separated from their families. We know that, while many of the Israelites had been exiled to Babylon, there were still others who had remained in Judah – like Jeremiah, who is writing from Jerusalem.

If we read the first part of chapter 29, what we find is that Jeremiah is telling the Israelites in exile to prepare for a lengthy period in exile. Beginning in verse 4, Jeremiah writes that the Lord God has said to all those who are in exile, “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they 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.” ... Jeremiah is instructing them on putting down roots, and he’s offering that at least two new generations will begin while they are in exile. Not only will the men have children, but their children will have children, before they are to return home.

As they are setting up new lives for themselves, the prophet offers further instruction in verse 8, “Thus says the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the 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, says the Lord.” ... In other words, you’re going to be there for so long that some people will begin to proclaim dreams, as if they are

from God. People will promise great things, as if that is what God wants. People will speak as if what they have to say is from the divine – it is not. You’ll be in exile so long, that people will start promising what they cannot deliver. “I did not send them, says the Lord.”

These instructions lead us to verse 10, where our text for this morning begins, “Thus says the Lord, only when Babylon’s seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.” This confirms what we’ve already read – the exile in Babylon will not be short. It will last a full generation – the infants will have lived their full lives, the rest of those sent into exile may never return – it will be their grown children, and their children’s children who are welcomed back to Judah.

This is the context in which verse 11 will be offered. The prophet has just spoken a word to a people in exile that says, “If you are reading this today, there’s a very good chance you will never return home.” And not only will they likely never return home, the Lord says, “only when these 70 years are up, will I visit you.” Are they to be abandoned in exile without the presence of God for this entire time of exile to come? This does not seem like a word of hope. If anything, this is about as bad as it gets.

And yet, to this community, God continues to speak the words we find in Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans for your *shalom*, and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

In this context, to this community, to these exiled and devastated people, what does *shalom* mean? Does it mean that God will give them great wealth? Does it mean that God will give them possessions beyond need? Does it mean that God will grant them lasting health? ... No. *Shalom* is never offered in this way. ... For these people, the promise of God didn’t mean anything even closely related to abundance – at this point, they just wanted to return home, to be reunited with lost family, to sleep in their family home and in their own bed. Like a parent finishing a 12-month tour in Afghanistan, the Israelites aren’t looking to return home to abundant glory, they just want to wrap their arms around their 3-year-old child again, who they had no choice but to leave behind when they were sent away from home.

I said earlier that though *peace* is about as close a word as we have in the English language to define *shalom*, “Shalom is not just peace or prosperity – [it is] a big, beautiful vision embodying all that God desires for creation. [God] wanted to restore all things.”ⁱⁱ If we keep reading, God helps define that *shalom* in verses 12 through 14. “You will call upon me, and I will hear you.” “When you search for me, you will find me.” God declares, in this *shalom*, I will no longer be absent from your presence like these 70 years you’re about to endure. “I will restore you all – I will bring you back – I will gather you from all the nations to the places I have driven you. I will bring you back to where I have sent you into exile.” The line, “I will restore your fortunes,” which we find in the NRSV, is not here speaking of wealth, but of number. God is promising to bring them all back – returning all who have been exiled to a unified community.

As they are in exile, God’s promise is this, “exile will not be the end for you. Your suffering will not have the last word. I have good plans for you, and my good plans are guaranteed to prevail

in the end. ... Light is coming. In this fallen, hurting world, weeping may tarry for the night, but God guarantees that joy is coming in the morning.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The promise here of Jeremiah 29:11 is not that God will give you the opportunity to reap great benefits – to be prosperous and wealthy. The promise of this text is that God would return the people of God from suffering in exile to be reunited in *shalom* with their people. When we broaden our view to the greater Biblical witness, we find this is God’s desire and promise, time after time after time. Ever since the perfect witness of creation fell apart in the Garden, God has been seeking to return creation to this vision of *shalom* – a world in which our relationships are lived in “worshipful dependence on God and loving interdependence with others.”^{iv} God has continually sought to bring about the peace of all creation – beginning with the people Israel, and inviting the rest of humanity to share in this greater promise of new life. “Shalom is never the private property of the few.”^v It is the outcome of the greater well-being for all people; it is the promise of just and equitable systems providing space for reconciled relationships to be lived and shared in praise and thanksgiving to the love of God that makes such a vision possible.

I know that in the world today, there are some who, like the prophet warned about, offer promises and dreams of grander, claiming that what God desires for you is great wealth and prosperity. It is just such a warning that Jeremiah offers to those in exile: “do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name.” The invitation of the text is to see that God’s desire is not for any one of us – or any group of us – to claim great wealth, but for *all* of us to live together in harmony, peace, security, and comfort. It is God’s desire to bring us all together, gathered in the great love of the Lord, where we might all share in *shalom* according to God’s will. When we reclaim the promise of the Biblical text, it often means giving up of the promise of privilege, to see that the only such promise we are offered in Christ, is that because of Christ, we can – and we will – be brought together as one people – one united humanity – to share in our eternal praise at the glory of God. May the Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, that we may we work as one Body for God’s will in there here and the now, that all may be welcomed and joined together to enjoy *shalom*, to be free from harm, and to live faithfully into the future filled with hope, which God promises. Amen.

ⁱ Nathan Hunt. “7 Features of Shalom.” Forshalom.com. Retrieved January 21, 2020.

ⁱⁱ Craig Greenfield. “3 Famous Bible Verses We Misinterpret.” March 22, 2017. Outreachmagazine.com. Retrieved January 21, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Platt. “Does Jeremiah 29:11 Guarantee Us Health and Prosperity?” August 24, 2019. Radical.net. Retrieved January 21, 2020.

^{iv} Hunt.

^v Walter Bruegemann. *Peace*. Chalice Press, 2001.