

A PROMISE WITH A CATCH

JEREMIAH 29:10-14

Do you have a favorite promise in the Bible? Here's a wonderful promise found in the Old Testament book of Isaiah about God and life's hard times. "When you go through deep waters, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown. When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up; the flames will not consume you." (Is. 43:2 NLT) Jesus gave us many incredible promises. Here's one that's very important when we face the reality of death. "Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am." (Jo. 14:1-3 NLT) Another incredible promise for hard to understand life experiences, says, "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." (Rom. 8:28 NLT) Years ago now, a friend found out I loved Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV). It says, "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 a hope and a future.'" She was kind enough to make a cross-stitch picture of that promise and presented it to me as a gift. I display it in my office here at church, because it continues to be a very meaningful promise to me.

In the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, God was deeply hurt by - and very angry - with His people for their persistent rejection of Him over hundreds of years. He promised them the three Ds: destruction, demolition, and deportation. The destruction of Jerusalem by the armies of Babylon. The demolition of the temple in Jerusalem built to honor the Lord. And deportation of most of God's people to Babylon. I've compared reading through Jeremiah to trekking through a dry, hot, thirsty desert spiritually. It's a tough read. But every now and then we come upon an oasis – usually just a few verses – that provide spiritual insight and understanding. They're like a wonderful drink of cool, fresh water surrounded by shady trees. In other words, a spiritual oasis. Here's an oasis which includes the wonderful promise I identified as one of my favorites: Jeremiah 29:11. But let's read it in its context this morning. Is it OK to claim v. 11 as a promise for me today? When is it appropriate to take a biblical promise and make it personal? Are there any principles or guidelines when it comes to interpreting promises found in the Bible and when we can apply them to our own lives personally? Before we tackle Jeremiah 29:11, let's consider first some...

RIGHT THINKING ABOUT GOD'S PROMISES.

It's important to recognize that the Bible is full of God's promises. Jam-packed. You can find God promising to do – or not to do – something on just about every page and in just about every chapter. Because of who God is, He makes promises. The Bible says, "And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises." (2 Pt. 3:4 NLT) It's also important to acknowledge that God's promises are always fulfilled. In each promise, God pledges that something will - or will not - be done, or given, or come to pass. God never makes a flippant, casual promise like we

are prone to do so often. The Bible says about God, “God is not a man, so he does not lie. He is not human, so he does not change his mind. Has he ever spoken and failed to act? Has he ever promised and not carried it through?” (Num. 23:19 NLT) No. God always keeps His promises, because God has absolute integrity.

Now, here’s maybe the most important principle or guideline of all when it comes to God’s promises. Context is all important to interpreting and applying God’s promises accurately. By context, we mean several things. What do the surrounding verses say? Who’s receiving the promise? What did the promise mean to those who first received it? Is it appropriate to apply the promise to myself and in what ways? Here are two very important questions to ask when you find a promise in God’s Word. One, is the promise general or specific? Examples are helpful. Here’s a well-known promise in the New Testament. “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 Jo. 1:9 NLT) The promise was given to first century followers of Jesus by John, one of Jesus’ disciples. But was it meant just for them? No. The context suggests John’s intent was to state a promise that’s offered to every follower of Jesus for all time. Over in the Old Testament, we find this promise. “As for you, if you will follow me with integrity and godliness, as David your father did, obeying all my commands, decrees, and regulations, then I will establish the throne of your dynasty over Israel forever.” (1 Kgs. 9:4-5 NLT) The promise was specific to a man named Solomon who succeeded his father, David, as the king of Israel. It’s completely inappropriate for anyone other than Solomon to claim the promise.

Here’s a second important question that touches on context. Is the promise conditional or unconditional? In the first book of the Bible, God gave a specific promise to a man named Abraham, “I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you.” (Gen. 12:2-3 NLT) Do you see any ifs, ands, or buts? Nope. This promise to Abraham was unconditional. God promised to bless Abraham and, through his descendants, to bless the whole world. Earlier I mentioned this great promise, “And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” (Rom. 8:28 NLT) Does God promise to cause everything to work out well for everyone who has ever lived? By no means! This promise is conditional because it only applies to people who love God and are in relationship with Him. To put it another way, only a follower of Jesus can claim that promise. It’s conditional. It depends on having a loving relationship with God.

What about taking a promise given thousands of years ago by God to a different person or group of people and applying to yourself? Is that OK? As long as we’re careful and thoughtful, I believe it is. Making many of God’s promises personal is appropriate because His character is consistent. The Bible says who God was yesterday, He is today. Who God is today, He will be tomorrow. “And he who is the Glory of Israel will not lie, nor will he change his mind, for he is not human that he should change his mind!... I am the LORD, and I do not change.” (1 Sam. 15:29; Mal. 3:6 NLT)

Australia is moving. This actually isn't so surprising—all the continents are on the move, and Australia drifts 70 millimeters to the northeast every year. Australia was once connected to both India and Antarctica about 100 million years ago. The continent still drifts away at a rate far too slow for humans to notice. But that journey is now starting to mess with systems that rely on pinpoint accuracy, specifically GPS. Australian GPS was last updated in 1994, and the entire country has moved a little more than five feet since then. Much of our current technology relies on accurate GPS coordinates. For instance, driverless tractors in Australia that help with farm work will start having problems because the information about the farm won't line up with the co-ordinates coming out of the navigation system. Everything on earth changes, including the mighty continents. But for followers of Jesus, God doesn't change, His Word doesn't change, and His promises do not change. They're settled forever.

How God related to His people in the Old Testament – the Jewish people - is the same way He related to His new people in the New Testament – both Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus. How God related to His people in the New Testament is still the way He relates to followers of Jesus today 2,000 years later. The way God interacts with groups of people is the same way He interacts with individuals. There's no difference. God always acts like God in every situation with every person. The Bible says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." (Heb. 13:8 NLT) So, having thought a bit about principles and guidelines that enable us to interpret God's promises correctly, let's apply them to the promise found in our Jeremiah passage this morning.

RIGHT THINKING ABOUT A SPECIFIC PROMISE.

"For I know the plans I have for you,' says the LORD, 'they are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.'" (Jer. 29:11 NLT) I believe I'm right to claim that promise for myself personally. First, God's ultimate plans for me are wonderful. Knowing and understanding the context only enrich its meaning for me. God made this promise originally to a group of people not an individual. It was sent through Jeremiah to the exiles adjusting to their new lives in Babylon. God didn't want them to be deceived by false prophets who were telling them they'd be back in Jerusalem in a couple of years. Nope, not going to happen. The exile was going to last around 70 years and we know from history that was quite accurate. The adults who heard this prophecy first were never going to see Jerusalem again. Maybe their kids or grandkids, but not them. God wanted His people living in exile to settle down in Babylon and prepare for the long haul. But none of this meant that God had abandoned His people forever. His ultimate plan was to bring them back to the land of Israel, restore them as a political entity, and – most important of all – renew and re-establish their relationship to Him as the one, true God. "I will end your captivity and restore your fortunes. I will gather you out of the nations where I sent you and will bring you home again to your own land." (Jer. 29:14 NLT)

So, what does this promise have to do with me? Because I've become a follower of Jesus, I am now one of God's people. God always treats His people consistently. God allowed His people in the Old Testament to endure great suffering and many trials, but

He didn't abandon them. God may also ask me to endure great suffering and many trials, but He will never abandon me either. God's people in Jeremiah experienced literal exile in a foreign land. The closer I follow Jesus, the more I'm going to feel like a spiritual exile in this world. If I'm truly living for Jesus, I'm going to feel less and less like this is my real home. Just like God's people read Jeremiah's prophecy as a letter from home, I should read and meditate on Scripture as a letter from my real home. God's Word sustained God's people in literal exile. It revealed God's heart and gave them perspective they could get nowhere else. God's Word sustains me today in spiritual exile. It reveals God's heart to me and gives me perspective I can get nowhere else.

What were God's ultimate plans for His people living in exile? The Hebrew word is "shalom" there in v. 11. Shalom is a very rich word with multiple meanings. All of them are very good. It can be translated prosperity, goodness, completeness, contentment, peace with God, peace with other people, and wholeness. Shalom is what God wants His people to experience ultimately. It's His ultimate plan for all and each of us. It meant return from literal exile, restoration of a national identity, and a new relationship with God for His people in the Old Testament. It means renewal and restoration of a right relationship with God for me today. Back then, shalom meant God sustaining and being with His people until they came back to literal Jerusalem. Today, shalom means God always sustaining and being with me, and then one day I'll get to live forever in the New Jerusalem. In the New Testament, shalom is described like this, "But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness." (2 Pt. 3:13 NLT)

"For I know the plans I have for you,' says the LORD, 'they are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.'" (Jer. 29:11 NLT) God's ultimate plans for me are wonderful. Secondly, that promise means God's plans for me transcend my sins. Again, knowing the context can deepen and enrich the meaning of the promise for me today. For God's people living in exile in Babylon, this was actually a surprising, amazing promise of hope! How so? They were in the midst of experiencing God's judgment on their sins. They were sitting in Babylon some 700 miles from Jerusalem precisely because – as a nation, as a group – they'd rejected the Lord. They'd worshiped idols. They'd taken advantage of the poor. They'd been immoral. Exile in Babylon was part of God's punishment. So the context of this promise was never, "Oh, God's going to be nice to all of us, especially me!" Instead, it was more like "Even though we deserve eternal damnation for our sins, God is going to shower us with amazing blessing – shalom." God's promise didn't remove or neutralize their sins. No, God's promise transcended God's judgment on their sins. Where sin was big, God's grace was bigger. Where judgment was large, God's mercy was larger.

So, what does this promise have to do with me? Because I've become a follower of Jesus, I am now one of God's people. God always treats His people consistently. God doesn't abandon me even when I disobey Him, disappoint Him, or reject Him. My own sin isn't bigger than God's grace. Even if God allows me to suffer some of the painful consequences of my sins in this life, God's grace and mercy is always larger than those painful consequences. At the very moment the Jewish exiles were being punished by

God, He promised them future blessing. How much more is the full scope of this promise real for us who live on this side of the cross and the empty tomb! Of course, God's plans for me transcend my sins. God Himself made sure of that. That's what we call the Gospel. Jesus died in my place. Jesus took God's judgment for my sins upon Himself. The ultimate consequence for my sins – eternal separation from God – has been removed forever. Now, like the exiles in Babylon, I can also say, "Even though I deserve eternal damnation for my sin, God is going to shower me with amazing blessing. Shalom!" It's like the hymn says - grace greater than all my sin!

Have you ever had a stranger pay for your meal at a restaurant? It happened to me a few years ago. I was having breakfast not far from here with two other men from KRBC. We were discussing church business of some kind and someone must have overheard us talking. He picked up the check for all three of us! I don't know who it was. I think he left before we did. I had a kind of strange feeling sitting there. Sort of helpless. There was nothing I could do. It had been taken care of. To insist on paying for my breakfast would have been pointless. All I could do was trust the debt was paid, feel gratitude, and move on with my day. God's grace is like that. How can we respond? Trust that we don't owe anything. Trust that grace pays the bill. Go forth and live our lives feeling profound gratitude toward God every day that we live.

"'For I know the plans I have for you,' says the LORD. 'They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me. I will be found by you,' says the LORD." (Jer. 29:11-14 NLT) Is this promise conditional or unconditional? It's not crystal clear, but I believe it's conditional. God's plans for me demand my personal involvement and effort. Again, context helps. History tells us that maybe the three Ds - destruction, demolition, and deportation - were the best thing that ever happened to God's people in the Old Testament. They were humbled. They prayed to the Lord. They began to seek the Lord again. When they got back to the land of Israel 70 years later, idolatry was never a major problem again. Incredibly, some 800 years before they were exiled in Babylon, God predicted exactly what would happen to His people through another prophet, Moses. "But from there you will search again for the LORD your God. And if you search for him with all your heart and soul, you will find him. In the distant future, when you are suffering all these things, you will finally return to the LORD your God and listen to what he tells you. For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon you or destroy you or forget the solemn covenant he made with your ancestors." (Dt. 4:29-31 NLT) God's people – those exiles living in Babylon - lost everything they thought was important and found what was most important: God.

So, what does this promise have to do with me? Because I've become a follower of Jesus, I am now one of God's people. God always treats His people consistently. God doesn't promise me eternal blessing – shalom – if I never repent and turn to Him. If I remain in my pride, if I refuse His correction, if I never seek a relationship with Him, I will forfeit all the goodness God intends for me. What does it mean to seek the Lord? How do you do that? Yes, it begins when you put your faith and trust in Jesus and become His follower. But that's just the beginning, never the end. A relationship with God isn't

something you “got done” years ago when you were baptized. Seeking the Lord must be perpetual. It should never come to an end. It should dominate my life more every day and every year. I invite Jesus to exercise His Lordship more and more in every aspect of my life – in my marriage, in my singleness, in every relationship with everyone, at my church, at my job, in my retirement, everything.

What does seeking the Lord look like? I pursue Him; I come to Him; I pray to Him. I desire to please Him more. I increasingly do life His way in terms of my attitudes and behavior. His mission to reach lost people becomes my mission. I cultivate an awareness of God throughout the day. There’s personal effort involved. I take personal initiative. God promises me here I will find Him if I truly seek Him. “If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.” (Jer. 29:13 NLT) There’s another promise! When there is authentic seeking after God, there will be an authentic finding of God. God wants to be found. That’s great news! But finding Him isn’t automatic, inevitable, or effortless. I must pursue Him every day. I can only continue to claim this marvelous promise if I continue to seek Him with all my heart and soul. Shalom – all God’s goodness – is not an unconditional promise. Jeremiah 29:11 is a wonderful promise with a very important catch. If I want to receive everything God has planned for me, I must seek Him wholeheartedly every day. I must offer God my sustained intentionality.

I’ve never purchased anything from a Nordstrom’s department store, but I understand it has a famous and amazing unconditional return policy. A man by the name of Vic Pentz bought a new navy blazer at Nordstrom. The more he wore it, the more he realized he didn’t like it. His blazer wasn’t the right color, and to make matters worse, it attracted lint like it was going out of style. After wearing it pretty regularly for six months or so, Vic stuck it in his closet and didn’t wear it for a long time. Tucked away in the back of his mind all the while, however, was that famous Nordstrom unconditional return policy. Even though he’d bought the blazer a year and half earlier and had worn it lots of times, Vic decided he had nothing to lose. He walked into Nordstrom feeling a bit nervous. He found a salesman in the men’s department, explained what had happened, and stood there waiting to be turned down. Instead, the salesman just looked at Vic and shook his head. He said, “For heaven’s sake, what took you so long? Let’s go find you a blazer.” Ten minutes later Vic walked out with another blazer that was marked \$75 dollars more than he’d paid for the one that he brought in. It was perfect for him. Didn’t cost him a penny. God is like Nordstrom. God makes all sorts of outlandish promises that we cannot bring ourselves to believe. Can we? But then we finally take him at His word. We seek Him out and pursue Him intentionally. He looks at us and He shakes his head. “For heaven’s sake,” He says, “what took you so long?”

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jer. 29:11 NLT) It’s a wonderful promise, but it’s a promise with a catch. I must seek the Lord. And He promises that if I will seek Him, I will find Him. And in finding Him, all His promises to me will be fulfilled.