

Text: Jeremiah 29:1-14

Title: “Light for Dark Days”

ILLUSTRATION – That song was written by Hillary Scott in a very dark season of her life. She and her husband were expecting a baby, but from the start her doctor sensed that something wasn't quite right with the pregnancy. Hillary says that she found herself in a “desperate and raw place,” where praying was really hard. The words just weren't coming. On the morning of her next doctor's appointment she was reading her Bible in Mathew 6 where Jesus gave the Lord's Prayer. In that moment she felt the Lord tell her that her situation was not going to end the way she had hoped and her prayer should be, “Thy will be done.” Sadly, the pregnancy ended, but Hillary shares how the Lord honored their submission to His will. Beauty has come from ashes as God has used her to minister to other moms and dads who experience the sadness of a miscarriage.

Let's open your Bible to Jeremiah 29. Jeremiah is the prophet the Lord is using to speak to His people in a very dark time. Jeremiah's assignment is to warn the Jews about the consequences of turning their backs to God and not their faces. While Jeremiah warned of an impending invasion by the powerful Babylonian army, the discipline of the Lord had actually already begun. Some of the political and religious leaders, along with many of the skilled craftsmen and their families, had already been captured and carried away to Babylon. Now they're living in a strange land under the discipline of God. The Lord has Jeremiah send a letter to these exiles, a letter that will give them light for dark times. **Read Jeremiah 29:4-14.**

Sooner or later we will all find ourselves living through dark days. Sometimes, like for these exiles, the dark times are of our own making. We disobey the Lord and the Lord sends trouble to discipline us. Or sometimes we are victims of the sins of others or simply because we live in a fallen world where there is sickness and death and lost jobs and tragic accidents. So how do we make sense out of it all? Does God still love us and have plans for us? We need light for the dark seasons of life. And we can trust the Lord to give us that light. Our text today shows us what we need most.

1. WE NEED TO LET GOD SPEAK IN OUR DARK TIMES.

This is the purpose of the letter Jeremiah is writing. God is always speaking through the circumstances of our lives. Nothing will make sense if we don't hear from God. So Jeremiah begins the letter by saying...

Jeremiah 29:4 - This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile...

The same thing is repeated in v.8. And in v.10 Jeremiah writes, "This is what the Lord says..." In v.11 and twice in v.14 he says the Lord "declares" this.

Now the first and most important way God speaks to us in our day is through His Word. Jeremiah's letter is God's written Word to the exiles. And the Bible is God's written Word to us. Nothing will make sense to you in your dark times if it doesn't drive you to the Bible to hear from the Lord.

Earlier I told you about Hillary Scott. She was going through the difficult and dark season of a problem pregnancy. But she was in the Word, and as she read the Word God gave her light for how she should pray. So as we faithfully read, study and hear the Word of God preached and taught, God will help us make sense of what is happening to us.

Now when you go to God's Word make sure you read and study your Bible properly. If you don't you may take a verse out of context, claiming something that God never intends to give us. In fact, people often take this very passage out of context by using it to claim that bad things will never happen to us. And that was happening for the Jews in exile. There were some false prophets who claimed to have the answers, but they didn't because they weren't hearing from God. **Read Jeremiah 29:8-9.**

The peace and prosperity prophets were telling them the exile will only last a couple of years, and then happy days will be here again. Sorry, but this wasn't going to end like some of them thought it would. The discipline of the Lord was not going to last *two* years; it would last *seventy* years. But God's Word shows us what He is up to while we go through the dark days of disappointment that last longer than we want. He has plans for us. We need to let God speak into our situations. But also...

2. WE NEED TO SEE THE HAND OF GOD IN OUR DARK TIMES.

When we're going through dark times, whether it's discipline from the Lord or just the result of living in a fallen world, our faith can falter and we can think that God has abandoned us and He's no longer working in our lives. But notice how this is worded in...

Jeremiah 29:4 - This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

So this wasn't just a mess they made for themselves, bad luck or a misfortunate encounter with an evil king. No, this was the hand of God. The Lord said, "I carried you into exile in Babylon." One of the most important things that can happen to you through the dark, disappointing times of life is to reinforce your faith in the sovereignty of God. God isn't sitting up in heaven wringing his hands saying, "Oops. I didn't see that coming."

Perhaps you made a mistake or committed some sin, and as a result of that sin there have been consequences ... an unexpected pregnancy, a bankruptcy, a shattered marriage, or whatever. Perhaps you have wondered, "Am I doomed to simply live out of Plan B or Plan C for the rest of my life? Will I never feel that I am in the center of God's will for my life?" Whether we are living with the consequences of our poor choices, or simply victims of living in a fallen world, we have to keep worshipping a loving God who has His hand on all the details of our life, and He always has plans for us as we go through the darkness and disappointments. But also ...

3. WE NEED TO LEARN HOW GOD WANTS US TO LIVE IN DARK TIMES.

God's Word doesn't always tell us *why*, but it will always show us *how* we are to live through dark times. The hand of the Lord is in this and He has a way that He wants His people to conduct themselves as they go through this dark season. Life hasn't gone the way you expected and if you could turn back the clock and do something over again you would try, but you can't. But with the Lord there's always a way back from here. The Jews are in exile as discipline for their rebellion against God, but they're just one choice away from getting back into the will of God. He shows them what to do.

ONSCREEN - Live productive lives.

Read Jeremiah 29:5-6. The Lord says, "You're going to be here for a while, so make the best of it. Get on with the business of living. I still love you and will bless you." And here you see the grace of God even in the darkness. You may have messed up, but you can still glorify God by living and eating and marrying and having kids and grandkids. That's God's common grace to all of us, even when

we're going through dark times. Quit moaning and complaining and roll up your sleeves and start living. God can use you where you are, no matter how much you think your situation stinks.

Get this: Some of them wouldn't see the end of this in their lifetime. By the time the seventy years were completed many of them would be dead. But God will use one generation to prepare the next generation to one day return to their homeland and reestablish the nation and the life of God's people. Parents and grandparents, one of your greatest assignments is to hand off your faith to the next generation and make sure they are ready to be the people of God in their generation. Establish a legacy. Make it a good one.

ONSCREEN - Be a positive influence.

Jeremiah 29:7a - Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.

This is what God expects from us as His people in the world where we live out our lives as Christ-followers in exile. This world is not our home; heaven is. But as we live in this world we must seek the peace and prosperity for the land where God has placed us. We must live faithfully as the people of God. Be good citizens. Bring down the grace of God into our culture.

ONSCREEN – Be a prayerful influence.

Jeremiah 29:7b - Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

This is the OT parallel to Jesus' admonition to pray for our enemies, and for the New Testaments command to pray for our governing officials, even when they are pagans and oppressors. One way we demonstrate our faith and obedience to the Lord is to submit to the people whom God has placed over us, whether they are righteous or not. And in doing this we live as God wants us to live in the dark seasons of life. But also...

4. WE NEED TO TRUST THE ETERNAL PURPOSES OF GOD.

Jeremiah 29:10 - This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.

Jeremiah has been standing in the council of the Lord. God revealed to Jeremiah what His plans are for the Jews and for Babylon. You see, it's not just about the Jews in exile. God is working out His greater purposes. After seventy years God will judge Babylon by raising up the Persians to conquer them. And it would be the Persian king by the name of Cyrus who would be kindly disposed toward the Jews and allow them to return to their homeland. This is the sovereign activity of God. He's always working out His eternal purposes in the events of history.

The Lord said, "I will fulfill my gracious promise." Now what is that? That "gracious promise" was given way back in Deuteronomy 30, when God first took Israel as His covenant people a thousand years before. God knew then that Israel would violate the covenant and he would have to discipline them by sending them into captivity. But He promised that when they repented and returned to the Lord that He would bring them back to their homeland from the nations where He had scattered them. They could cling to the "gracious promise" that God would finish what He started with them.

ILLUSTRATION – I had to go to Houston for a meeting a couple of months ago so I went online and bought a ticket to fly there. My boarding pass said I was on flight number whatever from DFW to Houston Hobby. When I got onboard, the flight attendant welcomed us on our one-hour flight to Houston Hobby. We landed and I got off the plane and was walking down the concourse and I saw one of those video advertisement boards that said, "Welcome to Baltimore." I had this sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Had I somehow got on the wrong plane? Then the message on the board changed to say: "Just kidding, but I got your attention didn't I." For a minute there I forgot the gracious promise of my ticket that said I would be delivered to Houston. God will always fulfill His gracious promises toward us.

Jeremiah 29:11 - 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.

How many of you would say this is your favorite verse in the Bible? Well, perhaps now you have a better understanding of what that verse means. It's not a promise that God will make the darkness or pain or suffering go away immediately. It's that the darkness, pain and suffering cannot keep God from fulfilling His glorious purposes for His people. Seventy years would pass. This small Jewish remnant held in captivity in Babylon was the key to the future. God had big plans for them. When they returned God would begin paving the way for the Messiah who would

come from those exiles. Do you realize that Jesus' earthly ancestors were among the exiles in Babylon.

The circumstances of our lives cannot stop God from fulfilling His gracious promises for us in Christ. He doesn't promise to make the darkness and pain go away immediately, but He promises nothing can thwart His eternal purposes for you. Listen to this: **Read Romans 8:28-30.**

God has a future for us as His people. And it was just getting started when God saved you. Through every twist and turn in your life His eternal purpose is fixed. He is making you into the likeness of His Son, and one day you will stand before Him complete in the image of Jesus. God works in seasons in our lives. You may look at your life and think, "This is the worst time of my life." Do you see that God ordains these periods of time, and He has great expectations for us?

But there's one more thing we need as we go through dark times, and this is what God is after through it all.

5. WE NEED TO DEEPEN OUR INTIMACY WITH GOD.

Jeremiah 29:12-13 - Then you will call upon 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.

Notice v.12 begins with the word "then." When is "then"? It is after they have come through the dark time of discipline. And this is what God is after through it all ... that it would deepen our intimacy with Him ... that we will seek not just to be released from the suffering, but that we would seek Him.

ONSCREEN - Seek the Lord exclusively. In v.12 the Lord says, "You will call upon *Me* and pray to *Me*." In v.13 He said, "You will seek *Me*." For years the Jews had chased after other gods and idols to fill the emptiness in their souls. God is using this season of discipline to reveal their idolatrous hearts and to teach them to seek Him exclusively.

ONSCREEN - Seek the Lord intensely. Notice the intensity of their seeking: *call upon Me ... come and pray to Me ... Seek me with all of your heart.* How many of you know how God can use the dark times in our lives to give us such a hunger for God that will seek Him intensely?

ONSCREEN - Seek the Lord expectantly. When you call upon Him and come and pray to Him and seek Him with all of your heart the Lord says, “I will listen to You. You will find Me.” When you turn back to the Lord with your whole heart He will not turn His back to you.

Jeremiah 29:14 - I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

Remember, that was God’s “gracious promise” from the beginning. “Bring you back from captivity” means more than just physically returning to their homeland. This phrase means an overwhelming restoration of all they had lost in the captivity. And the most important thing they had lost was their intimacy with the Lord. You see, it’s not just seeking God to do something *for* us; it’s seeking God to do something *in* us. In other words you will once again turn your faces to the Lord and not your backs. God’s discipline is for our good. That’s what Hebrews says:

Hebrews 12:10 - Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.

I’m telling you, to find God in the midst of our sufferings and trials is the greatest thing that can happen. So in this dark season in your life you aren’t stuck in a cave. You are walking through a tunnel to the future and the hope God has for you.