

## **BETWEEN NOW AND THEN**

### **Jeremiah 29:1-14**

*(sermon ideas shared by Rev. Bobby Dagnel, pastor of First Baptist Church, Lubbock)*

**Dr. Howard Batson  
First Baptist Church  
Amarillo, Texas  
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Ruby red slippers, a rainbow, and Toto – all familiar ingredients of the 1939 musical film, “The Wizard of Oz.”

Of all quotations from all movies of all times, “The Wizard of Oz” has two of the top 25 quotes. Coming in at No. 4 is “Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” And in the No. 23 spot is “There’s no place like home; there’s no place like home....”

The ancient Israelites are there. You’ve been there, along with Dorothy. Just wanting to get home to Uncle Henry and Auntie Em, back to Kansas. The musical is a search to get back home, to get back to the familiar, to get back to family.

Ancient Israel is asking Dorothy’s question. “Why are we here, so far away from home? Why are we here in exile?”

There is no place like home.

Jeremiah 29 gives attention to those in exile, those who had been taken away, captured, kidnapped, deported from their homeland in Judah – and carried away to Babylon. They were exiled geographically, displaced physically. But there is more to exile than geographical location. Exile, in fact, is not primarily a geographical phenomenon, but is a social, moral, and cultural phenomenon. It is the loss of a structured, reliable world which gives meaning and coherence to life. It is the loss of a framework and structure that has been treasured and trusted. A person can find themselves in exile while being geographically at home.

Perhaps many of you this morning feel like those ancient Israelites felt. Perhaps you, too, feel like you’re not where you need to be, you’re not at home. You’re in a foreign land. Some of us here this morning may feel like exiles because of circumstances of life. There has been a drastic change, like the drastic change that God’s people incurred. A change because of a death, a diagnosis, a bleak prognosis, a family crisis, a child who disappoints, a job that’s unsure. Or maybe it’s dropping a child off at college. Whatever it is, you feel this morning as if you, too, have been carried away to a foreign land, to a place where you are no longer comfortable. You have been captured and carried to Babylon.

The normalcy of your life has been ripped away, seemingly never to return. You’re hurt, angry, sad, frustrated. You know things are really never going to be just exactly like they were. Perhaps

you can't even imagine how you can go on, how you can keep on keeping on. Oh, you're still here geographically. But your exile is spiritual and emotional, because you, too, have had everything you trusted, everything you've looked forward to snatched away, never to return. For others, Amarillo may be a physical exile.

Chapter 29 is a letter carried by royal messengers. Perhaps they are dispatched for the purpose of carrying this letter, or perhaps it is taken incidentally, like the mailman carries our mail away along with other business. Because Jeremiah had intense interaction with King Zedekiah, carrying such letters may have been routine business for any diplomatic courier.

Jeremiah had received word in Jerusalem that there were false prophets in Babylon telling the exiles their circumstances would soon change, they would soon be going home. It was a message of "Pack your bags, God is going to release us back to home. You're just visiting, just passing through Babylon. Get ready. You're coming home." The false prophets were giving words of assurance, words of hope, words of peace, words of comfort – words that were absolutely false and absolutely a lie.

The exiles were making little or no effort to adjust to their new surroundings for a long stay. They were putting their eggs in the false prophets' basket. They were counting on the false hope of going home soon. Jeremiah knew better. He knew they were going to be there. He knew they had a seventy year stay ahead of them. He was disturbed by their unrealistic attitude, and so he sends a letter. It's a letter about circumstances and situations that cannot be changed.

"I know you're weary. I know you're defeated. I know that you want to get back to the homeland, that you want things back the way they were. But it's not going to happen, at least not any time soon. So between now and then, I want to tell you how to go on with the business of living – not just surviving, but how you can bloom where you are planted. It's about living with the things you cannot change."

I want us to look at three words of Jeremiah to ancient Israel.

### **I. The first word is "face the facts."**

To exiles then and to exiles today, to those who lament and despair over the way things used to be, how you want them to be, Jeremiah says, not coldly but realistically, it's time to face the facts as they are and to realize it's never going to be what it once was.

Look at verses 8-10.

For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, "Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your diviners deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them" declares the Lord. For thus says the Lord, "When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place."

These false prophets are found throughout the book of Jeremiah – chapter 23, chapter 27, chapter 28. They offer the seduction of a religious fantasy. The threat to the Jews is that they will be, by

these false prophets, talked out of the reality of exile, invited to deny the real place where they must live their faith. No pretense based in religious fantasy can extricate God's people from their actual place in history. They are in exile. They are in Babylon.

The false prophets are trying to peddle a bill of goods. It wasn't a wicked message they proclaimed – just a wrong message. “Don't worry. Things are about to change. Captivity is going to end, and you're coming home.”

Jeremiah declares, “Don't believe it. Things are not going to change. You are going to be in captivity for seventy years. Face the facts. Some of you will never come back to Jerusalem. Face the facts. This problem is going to last your whole lifetime. Face the facts. Your circumstances and situation are not going to change. Face the facts.”

Perhaps some of you this morning need to hear the message, “Face the facts.” The spouse that left you isn't coming back. Face the facts. You've contracted a disease for which there is no easy cure. Because of the merger, the job will never be the same. Your child, who has disappointed you, is going to continue to disappoint you for a while. The exile is not yet over.

These are difficult words from Jeremiah to the people in exile. They are hard for us to hear and even more difficult to accept, especially in our day and time.

Everyone has suffering. Everybody has a handicap, a shortcoming. The great Scottish preacher, Alexander McClaren said, “Be kind to everyone you meet because everyone you meet is fighting a battle.” When you think about it, the only really normal people you know are those that you don't know very well. You look around the room at school, you look around the room at work, you look around the sanctuary at church and you think every other family has their life put together perfectly – no suffering and no pain, a life of ease. No health stress. No financial stress. No relationship stress.

Whomever you're thinking that about, it's simply someone you don't know very well. Everybody has challenges and difficulties. Everybody has disappointments. Everybody has at least some time during their life when they are in exile.

Every generation of people endures suffering and headache. Previous generations suffered much more, really, than did ours – in some ways, at least. Think about all the illnesses, all the death in childbirth, the infant mortality, the plagues. Think about the lack of modern medicine, the life of struggling from hand-to-mouth. The difference today is that our generation is perhaps the first that expects to be relieved from hurting – that it is, somehow, our right not to have to suffer. Our mindset is that if something is wrong, then we've been shortchanged. We've been dealt a dirty hand. We feel like we shouldn't have to put up with the discomfort or frustration of changes.

This makes it all the more difficult to face the facts, especially when the facts aren't going to change. We function okay when the end is in sight, when the pain will soon go away, when the wound will soon heal. And most of the time that's exactly what happens. That's the good news. But what about those things that are never going to change, never going to heal, never going to just fade away? He didn't tell them to pray harder. He didn't tell them to have more faith. No.

Jeremiah's initial piece of advice to the captives was to face the facts. The situation isn't going to change. It is now part of your life's fabric. It is part of who you are.

## **II. There is a second thing Jeremiah says in verses 5-7. He says "flourish in face of the facts."**

Look at verses 5-7

Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens, and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters, and multiply there and do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.

Look at these commands, these imperative verbs. Build. Live. Plant. Eat. This is the key to the whole message of Jeremiah in this letter. Judah is going to have to face its proper place in exile. There in exile, there in Babylon, she is going to have to live her life and practice her faith. The Jews have no option to Babylon. This is where God has planned for them to be.

Jeremiah offers the exiles a new attitude, a new perspective – how they should look at the situation before them. Perspective is everything, isn't it?

Life is filled with heroes that jump the hurdles and finish the race of life victoriously. That's why we admire people like Louis Pasteur, upon whose wonderful work much of modern medicine rests – and all the more so when we realize that at the age of 46 he had a debilitating stroke and was a paralytic for the rest of his days. Or Beethoven, who wrote music while deaf. Milton, who composed poetry while blind. Jackie Joyner Kersey who won gold medals after overcoming asthma. As we look at the great work of this world, we realize a great deal of it is done by less-than-perfect people – by people who are living in exile, by people who are not quite home with their present circumstances.

Jeremiah says despite your exile, don't put your life on hold. Roll up your sleeves and get about the business of living. Bloom where you are planted. Stop window shopping and live with your own inventory. Play with the hand you are dealt.

God never condones our treading water, our running in place. No matter what our circumstances, the command comes. Live. Build a house. Plant a garden. Encourage your children to date, fall in love, get married. You're going to be here to see the mortgage paid off. You'll be around to eat the produce of the garden. If your children don't marry here, they are never going to marry. You're going to be here for the next seventy years, for the rest of your life. Come to terms with the facts or all your days will be here.

God gives us all a special field to till and accept. If the soil is thinner, the rocks more numerous, and the prospects smaller – then, so be it. That's how life is. Stop looking over the fence and daydreaming about what we could do with somebody else's field. The real test in life for you, and the real test in life for me, is not what we could do with somebody else's life or circumstances or health or financial situation or family. The question is what can we do with our health and our

circumstances and our family and our finances. The real test is what we can do with what we have. And we have a lot in Christ Jesus.

Nobody ever gets a perfect set of circumstances. Those who survive, those who make it, those of us who are in exile who prosper are the ones who say, "You know, it's not perfect, but I can make it work."

So many of you are paralyzed with problems. You're paralyzed with life. Like a frog caught by a flashlight, you're frozen stiff. All you do is sit and think about the way life used to be – the way it was back in Jerusalem, the way it was back in Judah, the way it was before. Before Babylon came and robbed all of our security away. Before the death. Before the divorce. Before the empty nest. Before the destruction. Before the disappointment. Before the bad news about your family. The message is this: Move on with life. You're going to be here awhile.

Jeremiah is not giving an unrealistic, Pollyanna attitude toward life. Exiles must grieve over their loss and express their resentful sadness about what was and now is not and will never be again. But Jeremiah refuses to sing the captivity blues.

We can come to terms with life as it is and enjoy it, or we can pout up, dry up, and wither away in bitterness. You can't change it, but within you, you can live fully, freely and faithfully. The fact of the matter is, life is only going to be so good, only so happy. God has never promised us a life of ease. Jesus says we are going to suffer as He suffers. The psalmist says we are going to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The apostle Paul says even God's best get thorns in their side.

Charlie Brown's sister, Sally, may have expressed it best when she said, "I think I've discovered the secret to life. You just hang around until you get used to it." That was the word to the captives. That was the word to the ancient Israelite exiles. You're going to have to hang around and just get used to it. So move on with life. You can either get bitter or get better. You can either be paralyzed or propelled by your circumstances in life. The command comes to build, live, plant, and eat.

### **III. There is a final word from Jeremiah. It is "Have faith in face of the facts."**

The most remarkable observation we can make concerning the exilic circumstance is that it did not lead the Jews to abandon their faith or settle in despair. In fact, however much the message seems to be one of doom and gloom, Jeremiah actually assures them of a future and of a hope.

Look at verses 10-14

For thus says the Lord, "When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you," declares the Lord, "and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile."

The message is Yahweh will keep the promise of homecoming. The promise is rooted in God's long-term resolve for His people. The future is a future willed by God that refutes any despair which Judah has experienced. While the ancient Israelites thought that God was inept, unavailable, absent and ineffective, they now hear the word of promise. Look at the verbs in this passage. Call. Come. Pray. I really am listening (look at the end of verse 12). God can and will do a new thing. There will be a time when all the suffering will stop and all the pain will go away and all the deaths that hurt us will be conquered by life. We are not to despair.

**Years ago, a television producer made a documentary on what it's like to be told you have terminal cancer. Some of you have heard those words. Some of you know that feeling. He arranged with a cancer specialist to place a hidden camera in his examining room. He got permission from a number of patients to be filmed at the moment when the doctor walked in the results of their cancer test. That evening they profiled three of those patients. Each one was told they had terminal cancer and only months to live, and the camera caught it all – the shock, disbelief, anger, terror.**

**The camera followed these three individuals for the next several months. All three died. What stood out was the different ways these individuals handled their terror. Two apparently had little faith, and you watched the anger and bitterness that developed. They never came to grips with it. They became estranged from their spouses and families because the anger and bitterness precluded their relationships.**

**That's what made the third individual so inspiring. He was a humble black pastor of a small inner-city church in his late sixties. When the doctor came in and relayed the news "You've got terminal cancer. You have only months to live," there was no outcry, no great anger. Patiently the man and his wife asked the doctor exactly what it meant. The doctor described the treatment and the steps they'd go through. They thanked the doctor and left. As they were heading out to the car, the camera followed and eavesdropped as this pastor and his wife sat down in the front seat. They bowed their heads and recommitted their lives to Jesus Christ.**

**The cameras were there on the last Sunday he ever preached. He was open about his illness. He said, "A number of you have been asking me if I'm mad at God for this disease that's been ravaging my body. I'm not mad at God. We live in a world that's cursed and fallen in sin and sickness, and death is just a part of it. I'm not mad at God. In fact, I love God more now than I've ever loved him. Don't be sorry for me. I'm going to a better place where there are no tears, no death, no heartache, no sorrow."**

**"Besides," he continued, "our Lord Jesus Christ suffered and died for our sins. Why shouldn't I share in his suffering?"**

**Right there on television they captured that moment. He began to sing without accompaniment in a broken, old voice, "Must Jesus bear the cross alone and all the world go free? No, there's a cross for everyone. And there's a cross for me. How happy are the saints above who once went sorrowing here, but now they taste unmingled love and joy without a**

**fear. The consecrated cross I'll bear till death shall set me free and then go home my crown to wear, for there's a crown for me."**

**He died that same week and was ushered into the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ whom he'd served all his life. (Roger Barrier, "Overcoming Handicapped Lives," *Preaching Today*, Tape 197)**

Yes, for him finally the exile was over and he was home.

Face the facts. Flourish in face of the facts. Have faith. We may just be in Babylon for a while.