

## **PRESENT**

Jeremiah 29:4-14

Our nation has undergone significant transitions over the past 60 years or so. Decades ago, we had a significant manufacturing base as part of our national economy. More recently, inflation has pushed wages and the cost of everything to unheard of levels and the unemployment numbers that are reported are meaningless since so many people without jobs are no longer included in the work force population since they have ceased looking for a job.

Undocumented foreign workers stream across our borders to do work that the unemployed will not do because those who are unemployed think of themselves as being overqualified for those jobs. The truth of the matter is that the manufacturing jobs are not going to come back from other countries any time soon. Most of the jobs in our nation that are available are so-called service-based jobs (read that as low paying) and (at the other end of the spectrum) there are jobs that involve a significant amount of specialized knowledge for which most of the unemployed are significantly under-qualified.

We've all heard the phrase "the new normal" which is the idea that what was average or "normal" has shifted and that our expectations need to be adjusted to make the best of the new situation in which we find ourselves. This idea of a "new normal" has applications in areas other than the nation's economy. It seems that we are living in a world in which the foundational basis upon which many have configured their behavior is crumbling, and we find ourselves confronted by cultural and administrative forces that do not fit into the way we perceive that the world should be.

All around us and growing we see more and more things that are totally absurd, offensive, oppressive, and pretentious. Other areas of the world have "been there and done that" in the past. A few examples that come to mind are Germany under the Weimar Republic, Germany under the National Socialists, Russia, China, and North Korea. It is interesting that the first known "trans" procedure was done in the 1920s during the Weimar rule in Germany. In addition to rampant inflation, there was acceptance of homosexuality and other perverse behaviors in the culture of that day. Eventually, many Germans saw the decadence and non-sustainability of what was happening and they found a leader who agreed to implement changes to reverse what was "their new normal" and he was appointed chancellor of Germany in 1933. It did not take very long for the draconian conditions and practices this new leader implemented to become acceptable to the people and adopted as a different "new normal."

The Jews were certainly impacted by what followed in Germany. Twenty-five hundred years earlier, the Jews who had been taken to Babylon found themselves in the middle of significant changes in their lives. It is hard for us to imagine something similar happening to us in our nation today. It would be like losing your job, your uninsured house burned down, half your family had been killed in a tornado and your retirement account had been invested with Bernie Madoff. On top of that the only place that you could find to live was 500 miles away. What are you going to do now?

There were three deportations of Jews to Babylon. The first deportation happened in 605 BC in conjunction with the Babylonian defeat of the Assyrians that held some of the territory of Judah. It was in this deportation that Daniel was taken to Babylon. The next deportation happened about eight years later when Jehoiakim defied the Babylonians. He was captured and we see in Second Chronicles 36:6 that "Nebuchadnezzar bound him in fetters to carry him to Babylon"; however, nothing is mentioned of what happened to him. The prophecy that Jeremiah

made early about Jehoiakim receiving the burial of a donkey was somewhat confirmed in Jeremiah 36:30 which states that his body would be cast out into the heat of the day and frost of the night. What likely happened was that he was killed by Nebuchadnezzar, who changed his purpose of taking him to Babylon and left him unburied outside Jerusalem. His son Jeconiah assumed the role of king but he only reigned for three months before surrendering the city to Nebuchadnezzar. It was at this point that the second deportation happened. Many Jews were exiled at this time. The city of Jerusalem was not destroyed at this time. That would happen ten years later following a revolt by Zedekiah.

### Thrive – 29:4-7

<sup>4</sup>“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, <sup>5</sup>‘Build houses and live *in them*; and plant gardens and eat their produce. <sup>6</sup>‘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. <sup>7</sup>‘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.’ Jeremiah 29:4-7 (NASB95)

Jeremiah’s letter was written after the second deportation. They didn’t have email or even the pony express, but there was travel throughout the area. People transported goods for commerce along the trade routes and apparently, written communication was routinely sent between cities. Jeremiah had heard about the situation of his countrymen in Babylon and realized that the expectations of most of the people were based on a false hope that they would be returning to Jerusalem in a few years. This particular letter was carried by a messenger that Zedekiah sent to Babylon on some official business that was being conducted.

This anticipation of leaving Babylon soon kept the people from doing anything with long term implications. If you think that your situation is going to change in a few years, then you are not going to find a permanent job, buy a house, or get involved with the community in which you live. Some of the early Christians in Thessalonica were so sure that Jesus was coming back any day that they did not work or live a normal life. Jeremiah’s purpose in the message of the letter was to get them to adjust to the “new normal” that they were going to be there for a long time.

This message from God had some good news and bad news aspects. The bad news was that they were not going back home anytime soon. The good news was that they could get on with life and do the kinds of things they would have done if they had still been in Judah. God was essentially telling them to be fruitful and multiply and make the world in which they lived a better place. Life has more to it than where we are living. Having friends and family and good relationships and helping others are much more about real life than where we live.

Though the judgment of God had come upon the people of Judah and many had been carried away as captives to Babylon, God had not abandoned them. They were still significant participants in His plan of salvation. God used Jeremiah to send a true message of hope to the captives. We would think that all the Jews in Babylon would have been eager to hear or read the message Jeremiah sent. Many times, God’s prophets are ignored as long as people have any other semblance of hope. However, when we are at the end of our resources, then we listen to what God wanted to tell us initially.

### Ignore – 29:8-9

<sup>8</sup>“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. <sup>9</sup>‘For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD. Jeremiah 29:8-9 (NASB95)

The captives were so anxious for this terrible nightmare to be over. They talked about it all the time. Some of the false prophets were giving false hope that the captives would return to

Jerusalem in a couple of years. Since returning home was the constant topic of conversation, they probably did dream about it happening.

What sort of things are the “false prophets” telling us today about what is waiting for us in the future that may be preventing people from getting on with life and adjusting to whatever new normal we are facing? What about debt forgiveness for those who borrowed a lot of money to attend high-priced universities? Does this not give people false hope and cause more people to take risks? What about all the quick fixes to losing weight such as radical surgery that gives people false hope that they don’t have to exercise discipline to have good health? What about granting low down-payment and low-interest loans so that people buy houses they can’t afford rather than having people settle down in a house that is affordable on a long-term basis?

If we know that God wants what is best for us and that He has a plan to make it happen, then we can enter into His rest and leave behind our anxiety. However, we must embrace the truth and not cling to false and baseless pie-in-the-sky presumptions that prevent us from settling down to the reality that we are in. This admonition should never be assumed to mean that we agree with or buy into a perverse new normal. In the case of the exile, the Jews who did not become Babylonians but maintained their identity as the people of God who were the “remnant” through whom God would continue to work in His sovereign plan of salvation for humanity.

#### Hope – 29:10-14

<sup>10</sup> “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. <sup>11</sup> ‘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. <sup>12</sup> ‘Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. <sup>13</sup> ‘You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> ‘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.’ Jeremiah 29:10-14 (NASB95)

After the time of judgment had run its course, the promise of restoration would take effect and the relationship with God would be normalized. This normalized relationship requires us to prioritize our lives so that God is first and foremost in all we think, say and do. If we call upon Him, come to Him, pray to Him, and seek Him with all our hearts (number one priority), then we will find Him. This is the same idea as the First Commandment, which is to have no other gods before the Lord.

There was nothing the Jews could do to shorten the seventy years since it was the fulfillment of what God told them would happen a long time ago in Leviticus 26:14-25. The nation was to operate on what is commonly referred to as the Jubilee calendar. When the Jubilee calendar was given, God advised them of their responsibility. We can summarize what God told them through Moses: *If you will not carry out all these commands, your land will be laid waste and the land will enjoy its sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate and you are in the country of your enemies. All the time that it lies desolate, the land will have the rest it did not have during the sabbaths you lived in it.* We can find in Ezekiel 4:1-6 an account of the fact that the nations of Israel and Judah had failed to observe the Sabbath years for a period of 430 years. During this 430-years period there were 70 years of Sabbath that had been neglected or more correctly, not observed. As a result, the land would need to have a seventy-year period of rest which would be in fulfillment of God’s word to them.

As with some many of God’s promises, there were conditions for participation in the benefits of what God would do. Those who would participate were to take the initiative and do several things. The first was to call upon the Lord and align themselves with the plans God had for them. The process for doing this was prayer which God promised that He would hear. In

this process they would discover a relationship with God that many faithful people throughout the ages had experienced. The process for them was to deliberately seek the Lord and His promise was that they would find Him. However, the seeking process was conditional in that it was to be something more than just superficiality but was to be with all their being. In other words, they were to put God as the priority of their lives. This is essentially meaning of the First of the Ten Commandments, “You shall have no others gods before Me.”

It is obvious that God still had a mission for the Jews. Following the years of captivity they would be given an opportunity to usher in the coming of the Messiah that would be the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. God told Daniel that following the seventy years of captivity, there would be seventy weeks of years (490 years) leading up to the culmination of God’s plan of salvation that would result in a new covenant. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke we find Jesus telling His disciples (during the Last Supper) that He had instituted a New Covenant in His blood. This New Covenant was mentioned by Jeremiah in 31:31 where he wrote, “behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.”

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations not of our own choosing. It may be because our job takes us to a new place or we have limitations imposed on us by infirmity or age. Our response to these “less than ideal” circumstances can be that we become bitter and withdraw into our own shell of pity or we can make the best of whatever situation we are in. God advised the captives to make the most of what they had and to trust in Him.

God did have a plan for the Jews and He has a plan for each of us. Just as the plan God had for them was for their benefit and not harm, we find that all that God allows in our lives is for our ultimate benefit in carrying out the main plan He has for us and that is to transform us into the image of His Son.