

April 28/29, 2018

## Why Am I Still Here?

*One Story: Finding your Story within the Bigger Story series*

**Jeremiah 29:1-14**

Pastor Josh Luse

*(Introduction Video)*

*Rich: So, I'm a staff member here at church and part of our job here is to be relational; it's built into what we do. But recently we're being challenged to take that a step further, specifically at home... specifically with our neighbors. Brook and I live in an apartment complex, and if you've ever lived in an apartment, you know that it's difficult to get to know your neighbors. And we really didn't know even the names of most of our neighbors in our building...until somebody pulled the fire alarm. And it was incredible, because the same day that we're being challenged as a staff, it really felt like God just went ahead and made it happen. In the 30 to 45 minutes that we're all standing outside surrounded by fire trucks, waiting to hear if there is actually an issue or not—thankfully there wasn't—I got face-to-face for the first time with most of our neighbors and found out details about who they are, where they're from, even found out that we live next to some musicians, which is an opportunity to connect and start building a relationship and being intentional. And it showed me that I get to be a part of something much bigger than just me.*

*Marlys: So, May 29th coming up will be the third anniversary of losing my beloved husband. He had a long term 10-year illness with early onset Alzheimer's from age 50 until he passed away. And so, that in itself was just a long road of a series of good-byes. To be with someone you love deeply for so long and to not have them there, has probably been the hardest thing in my journey with Jesus the last 30 years that I've known Christ. A lot of people have asked me, "Well, why don't you ask God why this has happened?" And Joel was the answer to that question early on. When he had moments of clarity and he knew his diagnosis of Alzheimer's, he would say, "Okay, honey, that's the diagnosis and that's what our story is going to be, so how are we going to glorify God through it?"*

*Dave: So, my drug dealer got saved. I was sitting there talking with him. He invited me to church but I wanted nothing to do with it. I said, "You're my friend; we've partied together; this is going to ruin things for us." And so three months later I was woken up by God with this feeling that I had to go to church. So we sat there listening to the Word of God being preached out of Genesis, and he kept telling us that our jacked-up stories—the things that have happened in our lives, the way we have lived—can be used by God for His story. And so that hit me hard because I had lived a rough life. I grew up with a single mom, grew up poor. My mom was disabled when I was about 11 or 12 and I had to take over a lot of the responsibilities in the house. And so to have this guy say that there could be a purpose for that and the Bible backing that up was pretty huge to me. I had never heard the gospel before. He told me that Jesus died for me, that He didn't stay dead but He rose from the dead and conquered Satan, sin and death. And now I can live a life because of that gospel truth that glorifies God, that puts me in relationship with God the Father. And so that truth changed my life.*

*Marlys: So the beauty of the story is that it's unfolding and we don't know when or how God is going to bring someone on our path. I really have a heart for women who've walked a similar*

*journey, to help them put their hand in the hand of Jesus and that there is a God who loves you, who is there for you, and nothing can separate you from His love.*

*Dave: I think the point ultimately is that God is on the move and He's working. And sometimes it's a gift to see how some of the pain we've gone through in the past can be used for His glory, and in ways that we never would have dreamt of it being used while we're going through it. I've been able to share my story with countless numbers of people who, had I not had those things in my past, they may not have listened the way they did. So sometimes it's a story that happens to us. Sometimes it's the things that we choose to do. But God can use all of it for His glory."*

Josh:

**“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.”** (\*NIV, Jeremiah 29:11)

We love that verse as Christians, don't we? It conjures up these images of puppies and rainbows and flowers, and we send it in our cards and we put it on our screen savers, and we hand letter it for our living room walls. You just google Jeremiah and it's the top verse that pops up instantly. I mean we all live in Nebraska—*The Good Life*—and we long for prosperity and safety and security and hope—the dreams that we're dreaming to come true. What's interesting is the bigger picture of Jeremiah 29 is that the Israelites have been captured. Their place has been destroyed and they're now in shackles, walking off to a foreign land—which seems a little different than the picture I just painted for you. So if you'd like to join me, we're going to be in Jeremiah chapter 29 this morning, and we're gonna start checking out what's happening in this story. Jeremiah, Chapter 29, verse 1:

**Now these are the words of the letter which Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. (This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the court officials, the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.) The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.** (\*NASB, Jeremiah 1:1-3)

Now whenever I come across spots like verse 3 in Scripture, I like to just make a note for any expecting parents. In case you're still looking for a name, there's always a good list you can find as you're reading Scripture. (*laughter*) But I think one of the important things is that we understand the context of this story. Now last week we talked a little bit about the culture and how important it is to understand the culture within the story. But it's also really important for us to understand the context. We can so easily go in and see one little piece of the story and try and base our opinions off that. But remember that Israel had wanted a king just like every other nation. They desired for this king to help them, come in and give them a bigger military and grow their wealth because that was the desire of every nation around them. And so God granted them a king—first Saul, then David, then Solomon, and somewhere along the line Solomon, after he's the king, there's this disruption and the kingdom starts to split and divide. And remember that all along the way God's intention for His people was that they were to be this giant arrow that would point everyone to God. Because of the way they lived, people would see them and look to God. But somewhere along the line they would take that arrow and they would turn it around and they would point it back to themselves.

They would just think of their own dreams, their own wishes, their own desires that were very distant from God's.

It's nothing new. We've seen it happen in our story all throughout, starting with Adam and Eve, and it goes on to this day to people like me. But the reason that they were having trouble and that their nation was starting to have difficulty wasn't because of the lack of military or the lack of wealth. It was because of the lack of desire to follow the covenant which God had given them—to obey Him and to follow Him in His ways. Instead they would just seek their own. So they'd go through these cycles where they would leave the covenant that God had given them. They would abandon that; they would start to follow their own desires. There would be foreign oppression that would come in and that would overtake them. They would live in this agony until, after some time, they would realize what they'd done; they would repent and call out to God and He would raise up a leader. They would start to follow him and he would free them from that oppression until it would start all over again—where they would forget what God asked them to do. And the cycle would continue on. Along this line, after Israel splits into two nations, the North and the South, in 722 BC Assyria comes and wipes out the Northern Kingdom. And somewhere along the way there's a character that arises in our story. His name is Jeremiah and he was a priest in Israel. And then God called him to be a prophet, and a prophet was essentially just someone that spoke for God. God would give them a message and they would communicate it to the people, and often that would take great courage because the people didn't want to hear the message that God had for them. And so Jeremiah came to Israel and they're again in this place where they've abandoned God and His ways and He continues to give them this message to call them back. If you go to Jeremiah chapter 2, verse 13, we'll see what's at the heart of the problem that they're having:

**“For My people have committed two evils:  
They have forsaken Me,  
The fountain of living waters,  
To hew for themselves cisterns,  
Broken cisterns  
That can hold no water.**

Now if any of you have taken survival school like me, you'll understand one of the first essentials that you need to survive is not a hotel but...water, right? So water is the key, the source to life, and if you were to go and look at a map of the land that we're talking about right here, you look down and you see a lot of brown. And then throughout this land where there are so many dry, arid places, you'll see these little fingers of green that follow maybe a stream or river. Water was a valuable resource. It wasn't like what you and I experience here. There's much less of it. So if you found a natural spring, it was the source of life. And often times, then the people would take and build these aqueducts or these cisterns to carry their water, but there would be problems that would happen with that. One is: they would make them. Along the way maybe the craftsmanship wouldn't hold up or it would just wear over time and there would be a crack in the cistern and you would lose the water. If you lost the water, that was a big deal. But not only that, it wasn't naturally flowing like a spring. The water in these cisterns would also get stagnant and then there would be things that would start to grow on this water and it would become toxic if you drank it. And God's given them a picture. He's telling them, “You've walked away from Me; you've turned away from Me,” and Jeremiah continues to give them this picture of them turning their back from following God.

Not only that but they've pursued the things that *they* wanted to pursue rather than God's ways. It's so interesting when you start to look at the culture that Jeremiah's speaking to them in. You see idols popping up all around instead of worshipping the one true God. You see some of the most vulnerable and the weak in the Israelite community that are being taken advantage of and forgotten. Because the leaders were more focused on themselves and what they want to accomplish, you actually see the people of Israel starting to become like the other nations around them, even like those in Canaan who would come in and bring child sacrifices in their worship of these false gods. It's into this setting that Jeremiah continues to say, "Turn back," and what's so fascinating to me is that Israel is one repentant conversation from being back into a right relationship with God. But they refuse to do that. Now remember this: When God says, "Don't," He's not just saying that to see if you'll do it. God doesn't tell you, "Don't do this," just to check and see. If God's saying, "Don't," He's saying, "Don't hurt yourself!" He has a way that He's planned for you and me, and His plans and His covenant are to show us that. But Israel continues to just follow their own desires and in 586 BC, a country from the north—Babylon—comes in and wipes them out.

Now to help us understand this, I think a story that I heard someone share might kind of bring it into a perspective for us this morning. So imagine we're here having a gathering just like this on the weekend. We're at church; we're singing; we've got a guy talking, maybe too long. And then we start hearing rumblings outside around us, and it's getting louder and louder. All of a sudden the seats are kind of starting to shake. There's a hole that blows open in the ceiling and guys start to rope down. All of a sudden we see this foreign oppressing army bust through the doors. Bryan's up here and he says, "You'll never take me alive!" Mike somehow comes out and grabs one of the mic stands and starts using it as a bō staff. But it's not gonna help us because we all end up in shackles, and walking out these doors, as we look behind us, we see our houses are all burning in ruins. We watch as this building collapses and realize that resistance is futile, because if we do that, we have a couple of options: One is us, or maybe our families will be chopped up into pieces or maybe being stuck in this giant fireplace or maybe being tossed in a lion's den. And so we walk away, seeing the destruction that's here and we're being carted away to a foreign land that we don't want to go to. Babylon was up north. (We'll say Canada.) If you're a Canadian, I'm sorry. (*laughter*) Okay, maybe something way worse—we're being taken to Iowa! Okay? (*laughter*) We're gonna spend the rest of our life in Iowa. This is the setting that Israel now finds themselves in. And so what they do is they find themselves in this. Jeremiah chapter 29, come with me to verse 8:

**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. Another translation says: the dreams that you encourage them to have. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them,' declares the LORD.**

(Vs. 8-9)

Now what's happening here is there's a whole other story that's going on within this story. As Babylon has come in and taken over, there's a couple of ways that nation would continue to oppress people. One, they would maybe destroy them—try to kill them all, wipe them out. That didn't always work because maybe there were survivors and at some point they would come back with a vengeance. Another, maybe they would make them slaves. They would just try to have them come and serve them, but after awhile that didn't always turn out the best because they would get frustrated and fed up with being slaves, and revolt. Or another way they would try and do is just to assimilate them into their culture—get them to worship their gods, to follow their ways, and that was Babylon's tactic. You might remember Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who had been given

Babylonian names and they were being offered Babylonian meals and given a Babylonian education with the desire to just have them melt into the rest of the culture so they wouldn't then revolt.

So Jeremiah is now with the rest of these guys. They're taken into captivity, but there's another story that's going on, and we'll go back to chapter 28 and look at this prophet that is spoken of in verses 8 and 9. There's this guy named Hananiah and he continues to tell the people, "Hey, don't worry. We're not gonna be here long—a couple of years—so leave your bags packed cause we're headed back to Jerusalem. It's all gonna be good." He has these dreams and hopes that, "Hey, we were kinda living the way we wanted to live and this is just a little hiccup and we'll get back to it." Check it out. Verse 1 in chapter 28:

**Now in the same year, in the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fourth year, in the fifth month, Hananiah the son of Azzur, the prophet, who was from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of the LORD in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, 'I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon.' (Vs. 1-2)**

Now Jeremiah had been carrying around this yoke to try and grab the people's attention, telling them to turn back because Babylon's gonna come with this yoke and it's gonna have oppression within us. And so then in verse 3, it says,

**'Within two years I'm going to bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house, which Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I'm also going to bring back to this place Jeichaniah, the son of Jahoican the king of Judah and all the exiles of Judah who went to Babylon, declares the Lord, for I break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'" (Vs. 3-4)**

It's so fascinating to me that Hananiah comes with such a decisive word, that he's so convinced that his dream and his plan is what God wants. We continue on in verse 10:

**Then Hananiah the prophet took the yoke from the neck of Jeremiah the prophet and broke it. Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the LORD, 'Even so will I break within two full years the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations.'" Then the prophet Jeremiah went his way. (Vs. 10-11)**

Remember, this is Hananiah's dream. This isn't what God had said. In verse 15:

**Then Jeremiah the prophet said to Hananiah the prophet, "Listen now, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This year you are going to die, because you have counseled rebellion against the LORD.'" So Hananiah the prophet died in the same month and year of the seventh month. (Vs. 15-17)**

Wow! A little difference there! Now a prophet was tested, and what they said was if what they said came true, that would show that they were a prophet. But Hananiah had his own hopes and dreams, his own way that he wanted life to turn out, and so he's trying to drive everybody else to that same way. So what's gonna happen with Israel now in Babylon? Are they just going to melt into the

society, start to worship their gods? Are they gonna ban together and kinda circle up the wagons and try and not associate with any of the Babylonians that are around? Are they gonna come out fighting in a way of condemning them for the sins that they're doing, although the Israelites themselves are walking in those same ways. God has a response. This is what He tells them. In verse 4 of chapter 29:

**“Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon,”**

It's interesting that I continue to see throughout this chapter, **the Lord of hosts**—the God of angel armies. God's desire is not just to build up a bigger army and they could trust and depend on that. God *could* do that but His desire is for them to walk in another way. He tells them this instead:

**‘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.’** (Vs. 5-6)

Wow! This is a little different than I expected. God's telling them to build houses, to plant gardens, to grow. This is not just sit and try and get through this little tough area until someday we'll be back home. No, He has a job and a task that He wants them to do. When we first moved to Lincoln we couldn't sell our house in Colorado so we lived in a temporary place and for a long time we just had all these boxes around us. And as we'd constantly go throughout life, we'd kinda be in this mode of someday we're gonna settle in and we're trying to get through things here; but we never felt like we were quite home. It was almost this idea that we could leave at any moment. But God's not telling them to do that. He's saying, “Unpack your boxes. Make yourself at home here.” Why? Because He has a job for them to do. In verse 7 he says:

**‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile,’**

The **welfare**. Your translation may say *peace and prosperity*. Seek the flourishing of the place where I put you. Now peace comes from the word shalom. The simple definition of shalom is not just that it's not a cease-fire; we're just not fighting. No, it's something way more than that. It's the fact that there's nothing missing; there's nothing broken. There's this wholeness, this completeness. So God is telling them, “As I put you into Babylon, you'll see things around you that are missing, that are broken, and you are the answer to those things that are missing. Step in and seek flourishing in this. Seek welfare. Seek it's completeness and it's wholeness.” He goes on in verse 7 to say:

**‘and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.’**

“As it prospers, you will prosper. **Pray to the Lord on its behalf.**” Can you imagine how difficult this would be? You're living in a place that's not home, facing the oppression of these people and God's telling you to pray for them? In Psalms 137 they said, “*How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?*” There's a tension that's rising in their soul. But God has something he wants to use them to be a part of in changing and restoring in the story.

A.W. Tozer said, “Prayer will be effective when it's no longer used as a substitute for obedience.” Hmm...What if God's answer to someone's prayer this week is *you*? What if *your* hands, *your* feet, *your* voice, *your* resources are the thing that's gonna help them in the place that they're at. The children of Israel are at a crossroads now, a decision once again. Are they gonna follow God's ways

that are so countercultural to what they were thinking or are they gonna do their own thing? It's a tough choice they have to make.

It reminds me that we have that same choice *every day*. We can follow our own dreams, our own story that we want to create...or we can follow God's. And it might not always look the same. So many of us go through this life thinking about what we can take, thinking about how life can build into *my* story and it's all about *me*. But God is flipping this around and saying, "You are a part of the giving, the flourishing, the restoration that I want to bring about in this world." And when someone grabs a hold of that; it changes other people's lives. It's incredible! This guy that was at this church a couple of years ago. His name is Michael Jr. and at some point he grabbed a hold of this story too. I want you to take a look at this:

(Video)

People ask me all the time, "Michael what was your big break?"

(Show host): "Our next guest is performer, comedy central's premium blend..."

(Another host): "He made his first appearance on the tonight show in Montreal comedy festival..."

(Another host): "You've seen him on the tonight show with Jay Leno..."

That wasn't a big break. The big break was at a club, and right before I got out on stage I had a change in mindset about comedy. Normally when a comedian gets on stage he wants to *get* laughs *from* people. And I felt a little shift take place, where I felt like I was to go up there and *give* them an opportunity to laugh. Now I'm not looking at '*take*'. I'm looking for an opportunity to '*give*'. This changed everything."

"My name is Michael Jr. I'm gonna do some jokes. And ultrasounds come in color now... which is ridiculous. I know it's a black baby. (*laughter*) It better be a black baby." (*laughter*)

I leave the club that night and there's all these people that give me hugs and high fives, telling me their favorite jokes. Then I look across the street and I saw a homeless guy. And I thought to myself, "What about him?"

Most comedy, most jokes, are a set up. My son who is 4 years old looks at me outta nowhere and he says, "Dad, I wanna be a doctor." I was like, "Yes, yes!" And then a punch line, and he said, "...or a dinosaur!" (*laughter*) I understand that me doing comedy and doing tv shows and making all these people laugh is really just a set up. My punch line is to make laughter commonplace in uncommon places. We go to Montrose, Colorado, a place called the *Dolphin House*. They take care of children who have been abused by their parents. And this grandmother explains to me that her grandson is being abused by his mom. He's so afraid of his mom that wherever he goes, he wears a Spiderman costume. So I get on stage, and sitting right up in front is Spiderman. I started doing my comedy and people started laughing...slowly but surely. Probably about 25 minutes into it I hear a voice, and the voice says to me, "My name is Ronin." And this little boy pulls off his Spiderman mask—and it was one of the most powerful moments in my entire comedy career.

Here's the deal: If we could just stop asking the question, "What can I get for myself?" and start asking the question, "What can I give from myself?" I think people will learn that you

don't have to be a comedian to deliver a punch line. It's really what I want to get across to people... and I think I just did!"

There are a lot of funny people in the world—and a lot of funny people are just trying to build their own story. “Look at me! Look what I can do!” But something changed in Michael’s perspective and he thought, “What could I do with this gift that I’ve been given to pour into other people’s stories? How can I create flourishing, shalom, with this gift that God’s given me?” Do you realize that *you* are God’s plan for restoration in this world? You! You’ve been uniquely wired for this task. Acts 17 tells us that God determined when and where you would live because He has a plan for you in His bigger story. There’s no plan “B” that God has. He’s wired you and made you because He knows that He can use you in this bigger story. I love the way that Rick Warren helps us see how we’re wired. He says, “Each of us has unique shape.” He gives this acronym: “...spiritual gifts, heart, abilities, personalities, experiences. God has given you His spirit to live within you to help give you the strength and courage and power to live out the story that He has for you. But he’s also given you a heart; he’s given you passion. There are things that are unique to you and as you start to talk to one another, you see these passions play out in things, that if you could just talk about this, if you could be a part of this, it just wakes something up deep inside of you. It keeps you up at night and sometimes it wakes you up in the morning because you want to be a part of this. God gives us passions and He gives us abilities.” Not all of us can tell jokes, but all of us have unique abilities that God wants to use in a bigger way in His story. Not only abilities, He gives us a personality, and each one is wired with a unique personality to bring about flourishing in a unique way in this world.

I love the story that John Ortberg shares about a guy that had incredible shape, abilities, gifts, personality. He says:

“Not long ago I boarded an airport shuttle bus to get to the rental car lot. Driving a shuttle bus is usually a thankless job, for the driver is often regarded as the low man on the totem pole. People on the bus are often grumpy from travel and in a hurry to get to their car. No one says much except the name of their rental car company. But not on *this* bus! The man who drove this bus was an absolute delight. He was scanning the curbside, looking for anybody who needed a ride. ‘You know,’ he told us, ‘I’m always looking because sometimes people are running late. You can always tell it in their eyes. I’m always looking because I never want to miss one. Hey there’s another one.’ He pulls over to pick up a latecomer and he was so excited about what he was doing that we all got excited about it. We’re actually cheering him on as he’s picking people up. It was like watching Jesus drive a shuttle bus. The man would grab people’s luggage before they could lift it. And then he would jump back on the bus and say, ‘Well, we’re off! I know you’re all eager to get there as soon as possible, so I will get you there as quickly as I possibly can.’ Jaded commuters would put down their papers. He created such a community of joy on that bus that people wanted to ride around the terminal a second time, just to hang out with this guy. We would say to people that got on after us, ‘Look at this guy. Watch him.’ He wasn’t just our shuttle bus driver; he was our leader. He was our friend, and for a few moments, community flourished...on a shuttle bus!”

What is the way that God has uniquely wired you for His kingdom? You may not be funny. You may not be a shuttle bus driver, but you’ve got something else.

I realized early on in my life that God had given me some unique shape. I remember watching Bambi for the first time, and I was a mess! Cause I wanted to be the one to take that shot and get that deer. *(laughter)* Ahh...no...I just realized God had put this empathy deep inside of me for other



people. It's part of my shape and my wiring. I feel what other people are feeling and God's wired me in a way that I enter into their stories with that. He's given me other unique wiring and gifting, and He's given you each a unique shape to bring out flourishing in this life. And part of that may be in difficult stories—not always in something you want. But do you realize that God can take even the difficult pieces of your life and use it for flourishing in this world? Painful experiences can be used for something beautiful. Jeremiah chapter 29 goes on to say this in verse 10:

**“For thus says the Lord, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon,’**

Seventy years! A lot of these people that hear this realize they're gonna die in Babylon.

They're gonna live their whole life in this place. In this verse that we so love, they realize that's down the road later on. Verse 10 he continues to say:

**“I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place.”**

You can check out chapter 27:22 to see a little more about that. In verse 11 He goes on say:

**“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. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.”** (Vs. 11-13)

Do you see it? That's what this master author, this loving God, this incredible story maker is after. He's after your heart. This was written for a very specific people at a very specific time and God's desire was to capture Israel's heart. And it's interesting because you'll see throughout this that He used Babylon in the process, trying to grab their heart but He was also trying to grab Babylon's heart through this. But Babylon would not turn. Later on it says that God would give them over to their own destruction. Realize that our sin causes this destructive piece within our story and the story of so many others. My sin can take me on a different journey and miss out on the bigger piece that God's trying to create. And he's giving them hope, yes, but their hope is gonna come after this season of difficulty within exile. But the whole thing he's trying to do with them is to grab their heart, and to use them to grab the heart of the others around them. But in verse 14 it kinda starts to shift directions, and it says:

**“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.”**

As I read through this, I get this picture of a good and loving Father, a Father that disciplines because He cares about His children. He wants to capture their hearts and have them follow in His good ways...as a Dad that knows more than us, that has a broader perspective. He cares about everyone, even those bad Babylonians. His greatest desire is to bring them into this bigger restoration story. And it reminds me that the children of Israel have a story that will play out after this but He had a very specific task for them while they were in exile.

I know that we are not in Babylon; we're not experiencing the same thing. But Philippians chapter 3 tells me that I, too, am not home yet—that *my citizenship is in heaven*. It doesn't matter what my birth certificate says or what my passport says, I am living in exile here and life is not always filled with puppies and rainbows and flowers. And, yes, there is hope. It's coming...it's coming...it's down the road—and God's greatest desire is for me to live with Him. But why is it that once I trust Him and I follow Him, and I accept Jesus into my life, I don't get zapped straight up into heaven to

be home? Why? I'm still here because He has a job for me to do. He wants to use my story in the stories of the other people around to create this beautiful, bigger story that He's working out. So I wonder: "How are you using your shape in this bigger story?" I wonder if you're allowing sin to come in and cause you to miss out on this bigger story. I wonder if God has people this week for you, in your life, in your gifting, in your stories and your experiences to interact with—that you could be this giant arrow pointing to God. Our stories are not long. This exile is going to be short. *Don't miss it!* I want to encourage you: "Life is about the bigger story, so live a story worth telling."

*God, thank You so much that You love us, You care for us and You relentlessly pursue us. And, God, I know we make mistakes and we mess up. Thank You that You are standing right there, ready for us to repent, to turn around and to join You. God, convict us of sin in our lives because we want to follow Your way. God, allow us to submit our dreams to You because we want to follow Your dreams. God, help us to use our unique wiring and gifts and abilities and even those messed up stories in our life to bring about something beautiful in the lives of others around us this week. God, we're bringing this to You in prayer and it's going to continue to be the prayer of our hearts this week. We want the city to be a place of flourishing. So, God, use us for the things that are broken within this city. Show us how You want to use us. Use us to be a part of the things that are missing in this city, this week. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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