

Prayer: Jesus, help me to be your salt and light in the world. Please send your Holy Spirit to guide me in all my thoughts, words, and deeds so that I reflect your love, goodness, and truth in all that I say and do. Help me to recognize any bad habits I may have that may cause my salt to “lose its flavor,” such as gossiping or using impure speech. Give me the courage to be your light in this world and not hide its brilliance. Help me see the beauty that your light shining through me brings to others. May all that I do be for your greater glory.

‘What IS God's Plan for Me?

Oftentimes, when life lacks clarity, we get lost. We can’t distinguish between good and evil, truth and fiction, or an outburst of anger and a cry for help. How do we find our way when things seem so confusing? What we need is a discerning spirit. Without it, we make unwise choices and miss out on opportunities for blessings.

Discernment is a gift of God and is something we should pray for daily. But we don’t have to sit around waiting for it to appear. We can seek clarity by reading God’s Word and learning from those who teach biblical principles. Also, we can learn from our own experiences as well as the life lessons of others. You don’t have to go through life in a fog. Discover the peace and clarity that comes with developing a discerning spirit.

Spiritual discernment is the ability to see beyond the appearance of our circumstances, perceive God’s viewpoint on them, and make wise judgments in response. If ever there was a time for this gift, it’s now. Today, culture bombards us with all sorts of information—but not necessarily truth. Therefore, it’s vital that God’s children attain spiritual discernment. Understanding this, King David prayed, “Teach me good discernment and knowledge, for I believe in Your commandments” (Psalm 119:66). Likewise, this petition must echo in our lives.

Our culture loves a good one-liner. That’s why we’re so enamored with the elevator pitch, and why we’re so quick to boil everything down to words that fit on a coffee mug or a bumper sticker. And for some things, that works well – like the line about real estate where the three most important factors are said to be location, location, location. It’s kind of funny and pretty accurate, so it works.

But when it comes to theology, one-liners won’t really cut it. When it comes to Biblical truth, the most important factors are similarly repetitive – context, context, context – and they take a little longer to unpack.

Take for example a verse often quoted at milestones from graduations to grand openings: Jeremiah 29:11, For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, a plan to prosper and not to harm you, a plan to give you a future and a hope.

If it says that God is going to prosper you, what happens when you don’t prosper? If it says that you won’t face harm, what happens when you’re harmed? Does that change who God is? Does that change God’s plan? Does that change God’s love? Does it change the truth of the Bible?

The Prophet Jeremiah enters the scene at a time when Israel is a divided kingdom thanks to the rule of harsh, oppressive kings – not an ideal situation, but one largely of the Israelites’ own making because of their choice to seek their own desires rather than God.

Jeremiah is given a dual-purpose mission: justice and mercy. Jeremiah gives many warnings and cries for the people to repent. When the people resist, Jeremiah's message changes and God begins to use leaders who don't follow Him to enact God's judgment. It turns out the punishment for generations of rebellion against God is a 70-year timeout in Babylon under the rule of the Babylonian king. The nation of Israel is now a nation in exile.

And it's then, in the midst of judgment and exile, that Jeremiah pens this verse that's often found on coffee mugs and laptop stickers. Plans, prosper, future, hope.... It's a strange combination against this related backdrop of exile and oppression. Exile and oppression aren't exactly things one would typically offer as encouragement to a graduating senior or someone aspiring to reach new heights or opportunities. But, these words are exactly what God said, through Isaiah, to God's people in exile.

God first tells them to build lives in this strange land. It's not the place they are from and it's not the place they think of as home, but it is where God has brought them and where God intends to leave them for quite a while – for 70 years, the Bible says. There will not be a quick return or a momentary reversal of fortune.

Even then, there were false prophets who were preaching and promising a quick and easy way out of exile. That was a popular message as it was certainly an easier one to stomach than the message of Jeremiah. That's human nature – we always want to believe what we perceive is in our best interest, and that perception tends to be clouded an awful lot by what we want.

The people of Israel are going to go through a lifetime of exile. At the end of 70 years it is unlikely that anyone hearing Jeremiah's message in real time will still be alive or in any condition to return to the homeland. That's why the earlier verses instructed the people to make a life – and a good one – in Babylon. But the Israelites as a people group would indeed return. But it will come to fruition in another lifetime.

And in the meantime, God has a lesson for His people to learn – and He spells it out in the verses following Jeremiah 29:11.

Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.
Jeremiah 29:12-14

There's a nice, neat happy ending. The people do return from exile. But it doesn't happen in verse 11 and it won't fit on a coffee mug. Following God doesn't work that way. It's more involved than coffee mug theology. But, dare we say, it offers a greater reward than a cup of coffee.

What IS God's Plan for Me? What's best for us, is to become good stewards and obedient followers of God. That's God's design for us. That's our purpose.

With all that backstory told, if you begin just one verse before Jeremiah 29:11, in Jeremiah 29:10, the meaning is a little more powerful. "For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

The people of Israel are going to go through a lifetime of exile. At the end of 70 years, it is unlikely that anyone hearing Jeremiah’s message in real time will still be alive or in any condition to return to the homeland. That’s why the earlier verses instructed the people to make a life – and a good one – in Babylon. But the Israelites as a people would indeed return because God does have a plan for them, but nothing indicates it’s a plan they would choose for themselves.

God’s plan for a future and a hope will be for a return to the homeland but it will come to fruition in another lifetime. In the meantime, God has a lesson for God’s people to learn – and it’s spelled out in the verses following Jeremiah 29:11. *Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.* Jeremiah 29:12-14

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People love pretty lies, so the world needs Christians who are willing to say hard things in a convicting way. Or, to put it another way, “You are the salt of the earth.”

At the same time, people feel embattled and crushed by life, so the world needs Christians to say encouraging things about our ultimate purpose. In other words: “You are the light of the world.”

As we preached about salt and light last Sunday, salt does three things: adds flavor, makes you thirsty and preserves. We associate salt with blood, sweat, and tears; salt indicates hard work and tough times. We associate light with loving eyes and glowing hearths; light is about joy and welcome. We also call people “salty” when they are sharp-tongued, with caustic observations that serve as an irritant. And we call people “brilliant” if they help us “look on the bright side” of our circumstances.

So, to be salt is to be honest, unafraid to notice that there are deep problems in the world today. Salty types refuse to blithely accept the world’s problems; they grind into them. Christians function as salt when we “Admonish sinners,” “Counsel the doubtful” and “Instruct the ignorant” — three of the Seven Spiritual Works of Mercy. Christians from John the Baptist to Rev. Martin Luther King have gotten killed for speaking uncomfortable truths; for being the salt of the earth.

Just like salt has no practical use if left in the grocery store aisle, our God-given identity as salt is of no use if it doesn’t translate into our everyday lives.

On the other hand, to be light is to be encouraging, illuminating God’s higher purpose, and sharing how greatly we are loved by life’s Creator. To be a light for the world is to “Comfort the afflicted,” “Forgive offenses,” and “Bear wrongs patiently” — three more of the Spiritual Works of Mercy.

Christians have shown brightly in the world, from St. Francis of Assisi celebrating creation to telling us that life is worth living.

What is remarkable is that Christians are meant to be both at the same time, irritants, and encouragers. As believers, we must add Christ's flavor to whatever environment He places us in. We are to preserve a Christlike culture in a morally decaying world. And we can cause others to thirst after the God we have inside of us.

Each day, the sun rises to warm, illuminate, and provide growth on earth. The moon and stars light the night, serving as navigators long before smartphones. We reach for the light-switch when we enter a dark room, and we depend on our accumulation of knowledge to shed light on our lives. Light permeates into every crack and crevice of our lives and beings, whether visible, tangible regarding warmth, or metaphorically enlightening.

Jesus is the Light of the world, the outer recognition of His Father's creation and presence, and the inward dwelling of the Holy Spirit, by which we know our God and walk with Jesus. Jesus is the Light of the world, our world, and in the world. Like God is omnipresent, so Jesus is Light. Through Jesus and His sacrificial death on the cross, we are exposed to the light and of our sins. As we expectantly prepare to enter the 40 days of Lent, we pray to Christ crucified for the grace to be irritating in a good way and brilliant in the best way. Then we as the people of God are called to look for people who need salt and light in their life. They aren't hard to find.

As children of a Loving and Forgiving God, we are called to be ambassadors for Christ. Jesus has call each of us to represent Him wherever we go — at work, at school, in the community, and especially in our homes.

What IS God's Plan for Me? I pray we never forget this mandate God has given us to be salt: to add God's flavor, to preserve a Christlike culture and to cause others to thirst for God. Oh, that the world would crave what we have!