

## Realistic Hope

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7

The Scripture we just read precedes one of the most quoted Bible verses of all time. It is a much-loved promise of God. I have seen these words on t-shirts, portraits, coffee mugs, bumper stickers. You've probably heard and said these words yourself. You probably love and believe in this promise: *"For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope"* (Jeremiah 29:11).

There is nothing to be disliked in this verse. Who doesn't want a better future and things turning out for the better? Good plans? Hope and assurance from God that everything will be OK? I am all in when it comes to good, positive things; even more when it is God who is promising these things.

From the text we know that even though God speaks to the Israelites of a better future, this "future" was not on the horizon. Actually, the opposite was true. Calamity and disaster were just around the corner for Judah.

Just a chapter earlier (in chapter 28), Jeremiah told the people of Judah that they would be put in an iron yoke as a nation. Disaster was impending. Jerusalem would be captured. They would be marched into exile. They would spend 70 years in captivity. Most of them would die there and then (and only then) their children and grandchildren would return from exile. This was no promise of an immediate blessing from God. They would go through hell before this promise would be fulfilled.

Our culture is so pain averted that we will do anything to numb ourselves from pain. We love so much the idea of a better future that sometimes we just want to jump to that ideal moment and skip the heartaches and difficulties of life. Yet, God's good plans are given to us in the midst of our painful and broken reality.

God's promises are **NOT** meant for us to mentally escape to a "dreamed future" trying to avoid the difficulties of life. Rather, God's promises are meant to help us remain steadfast and make the most of our present, regardless and in the midst of challenging circumstances. The hope we receive through God's promises is meant to help us bloom right where we are planted.

The Israelites were living in Babylon as subjugated expatriates. For the Hebrews, the idea of living outside Jerusalem was outrageous, unthinkable, and shameful. The combination of repression, banishment, no Jerusalem, no temple for worship, made a reality for the Jewish people that was hard to live. We have records of the distress and the emotional burden the Israelites were dealing with while they were in Babylon as exiles.

Psalms 137 talks about those difficult days the Israelites faced and endured during the Babylonian deportation. Days of agony and misery; days of weeping and torment; days of hopelessness and

desolation. Here is what the Psalmist wrote as he remembered those days:

- <sup>1</sup> Beside the rivers of Babylon, *we sat and wept*  
as we thought of Jerusalem.
- <sup>2</sup> *We put away our harps,*  
hanging them on the branches of poplar trees.
- <sup>3</sup> For *our captors demanded* a song from us.  
*Our tormentors insisted* on a joyful hymn:  
“Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!”
- <sup>4</sup> But how can we sing the songs of the Lord  
while in a pagan land? **Psalm 137:1-4 NLT**

Through the words of the psalmist, we get an idea of how life felt for those who experienced the Babylonian deportation.

It is in the midst of really tough times that Jeremiah sent a letter to those who were in Babylon as expatriates. In the letter Jeremiah told the suffering people, “God has plans for you. *They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.*” However, the prophet also reminded them of the harsh reality. They were to live in Babylon for 70 years. In a sense, Jeremiah is saying to the people, “**It is true that God’s plans are good; but this promise is not going to override and/or reduce the reality and consequences of living in a broken world.**” This is what I call “Realistic Hope.

Realistic hope doesn’t expect life to be an easy ride; it expects God to be our strength as we go through life. Realistic hope doesn’t seek to numb the pain we experience in life; it acknowledges it. Realistic hope doesn’t make us immune to painful conditions; rather, it increases our capacity to tolerate heartbreaks.

Realistic hope trusts God is fulfilling his promises even through the pain. Realistic hope does not try to “explain away” present situations; it accepts them, but it doesn’t regard them as unchangeable. Realistic hope gives us valor and stamina to face troubling situations. It reminds us that life is more than our present circumstances.

Realistic hope is not “daydreaming.” It creates attitudes and ways of being in the world that affects our present reality. This is why Jeremiah, in the name of God, wrote to the exiles: “*Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray “to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.”* **Jeremiah 29:5-7 NLT**

In his letter, Jeremiah is telling those under the Babylonian oppression, “Do not let hardships, nor the idea of a better future, paralyze you so that you are prevented from living life at its best in the present.” This message is as valid for us today as it was for the Jewish people.

We get discouraged in the face of betrayal. We get discouraged when the choices are hard. The world may feel like falling apart when we receive a disturbing diagnosis or a phone call with displeasing news. Anxieties may overtake our hearts and minds when love is not reciprocated, when the needs are greater than the means, or when we give everything and receive nothing in return.

Disappointments have the potential of crippling motivation and determination. Letdowns and drawbacks can create a pessimistic perception of reality that can lead us to just *sit, weep, and put away our harps* (aspirations and joy). But in times such as these, we need to remember Jeremiah's message. "When there is a *breakdown*, you have to *break through*; and the way to *break through* is by making the most of what you are given."

We need to be careful not only with the discouraging effects of adversities. We need to be careful about getting obsessed with the hope of a better future. This obsession can lead us to forget to live the present.

As Christians, we believe that Christ will make all things right in his second and final coming. Yet, as we wait for the completion of God's promise, we need to work for the peace (*shalom*: life in all its fullness) and prosperity of the city where we are living, just as Jeremiah charged those who were living in exile.

In a sense, most of us are living in exile. Due to the different problems we have, our community, our church, our schools, and workplaces may no longer have the feeling of "home." It is in this exile where we are called to work for peace and prosperity. "We may have little opportunity to impact major structures of our society, [but] we can touch our neighbors and colleagues. We can work for justice [godliness and holiness] in our spheres of influence. We can seek to be people of shalom in our relationships at work, at school, at home, and in the community. In this way, we honor the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

Here is the essence of what I have been trying to say. God's promises are true, but they also are in the hands of our sovereign God. God is God and we are not. God cannot be manipulated or enticed by us. Even though we are promised a disaster-free future, we are called to live in our broken, present reality with realistic hope. Realistic hope is about trusting God during our personal "70 years in Babylon." Realistic hope invites us to live life at its best in the midst of unfavorable circumstances. It invites us to grow where we are planted. It invites us to work for the peace and prosperity of the city where we are living.

Right now, I have dear Christ-following friends who are fighting cancer, struggling with addictions, wrestling with relationships and agonizing with mental illness. They are heroes of the

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<sup>1</sup> "Work for the Peace and Prosperity of the City - The High Calling - Theology of Work," accessed October 6, 2016, <https://www.theologyofwork.org/the-high-calling/daily-reflection/work-peace-and-prosperity-city>.

faith as they trust God in their personal exiles. This is what Jeremiah is trying to instill in us, a hope that will help us live and make life better in our exiles.