

Whenever I hear people talk about God's promises in scripture, the skeptic in me rises up. Yes, God's promises are true, but they are usually given just to a specific person or people group for a specific time. We can't take these promises and assume they apply to everyone across all time. When God said to Abraham, "I will make you in to a mighty nation (Gen. 12)", we can't usurp that promise for ourselves and assume we're going to grow into a huge church, or gathering, or Christian nation. Nor can we assume that since we aren't growing, we are disobeying God's command. That was Abraham's promise, not ours to usurp (love that word: "usurp").

One of my favorite promises that we usurp (see?) is Jer. 29:11 – *"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."* While this may be true for many of God's people in many situations, the reality is that God through Jeremiah was speaking to a very specific group: the Israelites in exile. Israel had sinned so badly against God, at times even forgotten Him altogether for generations, that God allowed them to be conquered and taken away into exile – twice. If we read the whole chapter of Jer. 29, we find God telling people to settle in for the long haul. *"4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'" So, for a few generations – GENERATIONS! – settle down and live as exiled people, separate from your churches and each other, with your life determined by an outside force (no, not COVID, but you can see the parallels).*

And only after this, after 70 years of exile, do we get 29:11 – "For I know the plans I have for you..." But in fact, there's more. After we read Jer. 29:11, we jump right to Jer. 29:13, another wonderful promise to an exiled people: "You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart." But guess what we skipped? Yup, Jer. 29:12: "Then you will call on Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you." Then? When? After 70 years of exile, two or three generations of enslaved living. Then, and only then, will you call on God. Then and only then will you pray. Then and only then will you actually seek God with ALL your heart.

It's kind of depressing to read the bible in context sometimes. Can't we just leave Jer. 29:11 alone and keep putting it on our graduation and confirmation cards, blissfully unaware that the promise is a LOOOOOOOOOOONG way off? Isn't there any good news in this?

Of course there is. The good news is that God is not abandoning us in our exile, whether to a foreign power, or our own powers, or COVID, or a sinful world full of racism and violence. On the contrary, God is right here waiting for us to listen, to turn back to Him, to take all that He offers. The 70 years of exile is not a time out for bad behavior with God the jailor punishing us. It is the natural outcome of the choices we've made, and God is not holding the keys in a clenched fist but in an open hand, just waiting for us to take them. "I have plans and they're good," God says. And after 70 years you'll get it and return to me, seek me out, find me, and do it not half-heartedly but with your WHOLE heart.

The promise of Jer. 29:11 for us today is not that God will prosper us the way we want Him to. It's not that God will manipulate the future for our benefit. It's that God is ready to free us from our bondage to self, to sin, to addiction, to evil, to our own racism, to oppression of all kinds. God knows how long it will take us to turn back to Him – if indeed we will – and that's the prophecy of the promise. But God is ready and waiting for us the minute we do, to take us out of exile and lead us back home to the Kingdom where we belong.

Questions to ponder:

What has you in bondage today? Make a list, and then ask God to reveal the others you are unaware of.

How long do you think it will take you to seek God with ALL your heart? Ask Him how long it will be.

Are you ready to take the keys God has in His hand, the keys to freedom from oppression, freedom to follow without hinderance?