

# BaptistWay: When you're not where you want to be

March 20, 2014

- *The BaptistWay lesson for April 6 focuses on Jeremiah 29:1-14.*

## **When knowing the Bible is bad**

“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” (v. 11). Like many Christians, this is one of the Bible verses I’ve memorized and know by heart. It’s impossible not to memorize it, because we see it plastered on Hallmark cards given at graduation ceremonies, to those in the hospital, and on occasions simply meant to cheer someone up who has had a bad day. The message conveyed is one of positivity, hope and encouragement.

I hate being the glass-half-empty guy, but I think the familiarity with this verse has done more harm to people’s faith than it has helped. It propagates a simple and false assumption that God promises prosperity to each and every person he has created, and that those currently going through a tough time simply need to wait. “Your time is coming,” the verse seems to imply. “It is all part of God’s plan to make your life better.”

Use of this verse as “self-help” to get someone through a tough time never was the intention of this passage. In fact, in context, it implies the exact opposite. Tough times come for everyone, and the proper response is not to wait until they are over to live your life, but to live in the midst of the place you find yourself.

## **The letter**

To understand this, Jeremiah 29:11 must be examined within a letter

Jeremiah sent to the Jews who had been carried off into exile (v. 1). Last week, we examined Jeremiah 36, where King Jehoiakim refused to heed the warning given by Jeremiah and his call to repentance. The events recorded in this chapter occur after some time has elapsed and the consequences of that episode have come to reality (v. 2). Now, Jeremiah no longer is concerned with warning the people about how to avoid exile; he is concerned with telling them how to live in the midst of it.

### **Living in the present**

Take note of the imperatives given to these people: “build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce” (v. 5); “marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for yours sons and give your daughters in marriage” (v. 6); “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have called you into exile” (v. 7). These are not instructions given to people whose “time is coming” in the near future. These are instructions given to people who likely will live the rest of their lives in captivity. That does not mean their lives are over, that God has abandoned them or even that their lives are doomed to unbearable agony. It means their lives may not ever look like they want; yet they still can be blessed.

### **Looking toward the future**

It was 70 years before God delivered his people from Babylon (v. 10). This is part of the “plan” mentioned in our misapplied Hallmark verse. These plans were not for one person, but for a group of people. The prosperity, safety and hope-filled future promised in verse 11 are presented as shared ideals for God’s people to live toward. Those being addressed understand this is something they likely never will experience, but are encouraged and motivated by the fact that it is something their children and grandchildren have a chance to realize.

Just as God’s people in the Old Testament were called to live toward

fulfilling their potential as being a group set apart by God, we are called to live toward being a part of what Jesus calls “the kingdom of God.” One who lives with this goal in mind does not see a temptation to apply Jeremiah 29:11 to his or her own personal happiness but to the hope and future Jesus has promised those living in his kingdom.

This began to take root in my mind as a student at East Texas Baptist University one semester when the semester’s theme for chapel was “Kingdom Practices of Kingdom People.” Throughout the whole semester, we listened to people who were living out this kingdom call.

### **Not living for yourself**

We heard from missionaries, church planters, entrepreneurs, business executives, professors, pastors and laypeople. They had one thing in common: They were not living for themselves. They weren’t trying to be prosperous for the sake of having money or looking to the future for the sake of being secure. That’s a hard trap not to fall into, and Jeremiah 29:11 should not be seen as an excuse to do so.

Here’s a tip that helps me refocus myself when I am tempted to see God’s plan as only revolving around me. I read Jeremiah 29:11 and substitute the word “you” with the plural equivalent “you all” (or y’all if you feel so inclined): “For I know the plans I have for you all,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you all and not to harm you all, plans to give you all hope and a future.”

How are you living into God’s plan for all his people?