

Explore the Bible: God is Present

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- *The Explore the Bible lesson for July 16 focuses on Jeremiah 29:4-14.*

As children, often the reality that made a difference between our participation in an activity and our refusal to take part was the presence of someone we trusted. How many rides in amusement parks or jumps into pools have taken place simply because a mom or dad said the magic words: “Don’t worry. I’ll be right here with you”?

“I will be with you.” This is the foremost promise from God to his people throughout the Bible, both in terms of number of occurrences and importance. It is imbedded in God’s words to Abraham, Jacob, Moses and Joshua in the Old Testament and is among the last words spoken by Jesus to his disciples in the New Testament. Presence matters. Or at least it should.

In our passage today, Judah is on the verge of exile in Babylon. Several already had been taken and Jeremiah has been warning them that more will soon follow.

Amid warning them about false prophets and the false hope they offered,

he offered them a word of actual hope built into the truth that regardless of what they went through, God would be with them. As we hear God's words of warning and hope to Judah, perhaps we can gain a proper set of priorities built around his presence rather than our prosperity.

Thrive (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

Jeremiah begins by addressing the people who already have been resettled in Babylon. He encourages them to begin to build a life there. His words are built around two significant issues that the people were facing.

First, the people were dealing with a sense of being abandoned and lost. Being removed from the promised land was their worst fear. God seeks to reassure those who have already gone to Babylon that the covenant was never about their relationship to the land, but their connection to him.

Second, Jeremiah wanted to battle the false words of prophets who were telling them sin ultimately did not matter and a reversal of God's judgment was just around the corner. The people had to understand that while their life was not over, their sin did play a significant part in their predicament. Jeremiah was not going to let a false hope settle in.

Given God's propensity for speaking words that express both encouragement and correction, what areas in your life's experience with God have you perhaps missed one of those elements because you only wanted to focus on one?

Ignore (Jeremiah 29:8-9)

Jeremiah moves in the next section to make his point about false words more overt. He explicitly tells the people to ignore the false prophets, because they have not been sent by God.

In times of distress, there always are going to be people telling us not to worry. Some tell us because they just want to make people feel better. Others are driven by more nefarious purposes, attempting to gain wealth, prestige or power through manipulation of those who are listening to them.

Regardless of the motive, the message was a lie. In the previous chapter, Jeremiah deals with Hananiah's prophecy that God would soon break the yoke of Babylon's power over Judah. What is fascinating about the exchange is Jeremiah's wish that Hananiah's words would come true (28: 6). I do not think Jeremiah's words are mocking Hananiah but are rather his honest appraisal about God's propensity for turning words of judgment into words of blessing (cf. Jeremiah 18:7-10).

One of the difficulties in discerning false teaching from true is that false teaching often is peppered with bits of truth. Jeremiah ultimately points out the fallacy of Hananiah's words by noting that although God is fully capable of forgiving, the hope being offered was not borne from a mindset of grace but instead from entitlement. The promise of deliverance was not consistent with God's character and purpose.

What are some false promises and perspectives that we need to learn how to ignore today? How do we go about collecting the whole counsel of God on an issue and applying it properly, rather than simply going with the message we like the most?

Hope (Jeremiah 29:10-14)

Jeremiah wraps up his message with three very important facts: First, Jerusalem will be destroyed, and the remainder of the people will go into exile. Second, this time of exile will last seventy years. Third, the ultimate goal of this time of exile was Israel's well-being, not her destruction.

Together, these facts are meant to confirm the word of judgment that God

was speaking and to give purpose to that judgment. People can deal with most anything if they know there is an end to it.

Verse 11 is among the most misapplied passages in all of Scripture. While there is certainly a general sense in which God seeks to move his people toward blessing, this passage is centered on the nation as a unit, not the individuals that make it up.

Furthermore, it is spoken in the context of judgment, not as a blanket promise of well-being. The propensity we have for assuming it about us is exactly the kind of presumption the false prophets were working from, and the people of Judah were living under.

God's word is driven by hope. Since the fall of man, God has persistently pursued us, even to the point of sending his son to die on the cross. That death, so significant and final, was addressed by a risen Savior three days later—ultimate hope was offered to all mankind. Just as God's word were meant to offer hope to Judah, Jesus' words to us promised his presence, even to the end of this desperate and difficult age.

What does it say that some of God's strongest words of hope are offered during his strongest actions of judgment? How does this model of actions from God inform our interactions with our children and others we are called to hold accountable for their actions? How does it change things to realize that the our hope is not in an outcome, but in a person?

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