

Jeremiah 29.10-14

“For surely I know the plans I have for you” says the Lord. “Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”
Jeremiah 29.11

By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept;
When we remembered Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our harps.
Our captors there asked us for songs,
And our tormentors asked us for mirth, saying
“Sing us a song of Zion”
But how shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?

These words from Psalm 137 were written at the lowest point in the history of God’s people.

Those who sit by the rivers of Babylon are *Israelites*.

Sons of God’s Chosen - Abraham

Descendants of Jacob,

Those whom God had rescued from Egypt, opening the Red Sea before them and drowning the Egyptian soldiers in their wake.

Those whom God had guided through the desert, miraculously supplying manna from heaven and water from a rock.

Those whom God had made the walls of Jericho fall before and before whom mighty armies had crumbled.

Citizens of Israel – the land of the prophets, the nation of great kings, the home of the Temple, the keeper of the Commandments of God himself.

A people chosen and precious in God’s sight.

How then had they ended up here – in Babylon?

Forcibly deported from their homes, their families, the land – the land that God had given them as an inheritance for ever.

How had they ended up here, in Babylon?

Captives, slaves.

Laughed at, taunted –

“Sing us one of those songs of Zion – the happy songs of your God and his love and his power and goodness.”

Oh that they were back in Jerusalem, or on the mountains of Judah where sheep happily grazed or in the valley vineyards full with grapes; in the fields overflowing with milk and honey!

Then they would sing.

But here? In Babylon? Far from all they knew and loved; far from family and friends, far from the sure signs of God’s presence in the Temple?

And so God's people cry in anguish, "How can we sing the Lord's song here...in Babylon, in this strange and foreign land?"

I wonder, can you identify with the Israelites?

Have you been to Babylon?

Are you there now?

A place of pain and suffering; a place far from all that you know and love?

A place where you do not know how you got there and you certainly don't know the way back.

Have you been to Babylon?

A place where the old certainties are gone and you can't get your bearings and your heart cries out,

God, why is this happening?

Where are you?

How can I sing your song here... a stranger in a foreign land?

It is in this context that God's people would have received the prophesy of Jeremiah, the second passage in our summer sermon series, "A summer in the Word – bible passages to learn and live by".

"For surely I know the plans I have for you" says the Lord. "Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."
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The prophet Jeremiah is one of the 3 'major' prophets of the Old Testament, along with Isaiah and Ezekiel.

He began his prophetic ministry in 626BC, in the 13th year of the reign of King Josiah of Judah and continued to speak God's message to the people of Israel's southern kingdom until their exile to Babylon four decades later in 587BC.

Jeremiah's message was essentially one of doom and gloom. God's people had turned their back on God too many times, and now God was going to punish them.

Jeremiah's message did not make him popular – speaking God's word doesn't always bring you friends.

And his message was not believed by many. God warned Jeremiah of this but compelled him to set his word before the people anyway – one day they would think back to what he and said and understand.

But even in the midst of the denunciations and warning of impending punishment, there are glimmers of hope.

"For surely I know the plans I have for you" says the Lord. "Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."
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And all those years later as God's people sat by the rivers of Babylon, crushed and defeated, we can imagine their minds turning back to the words of Jeremiah.

What was it he had said?

“For surely I know the plans I have for you” says the Lord. “Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Could it be true?

Could it be that although they had so ill-treated God, he had not given up on them?

Could it be that even in Babylon, God was there, working out his purposes, planning a good future for them; a future with hope?

Indeed, he was!

Though a mother forgets the baby at her breast

and has no compassion on the child she has borne

I will not forget you!

The Lord says in Isaiah 49.15

Now this passage from Jeremiah is a real Christian favourite

“I know the plans I have for you” says the Lord. “Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

Go to any Christian bookshop and you will find cards with it printed as a verse inside.

It is a wonderful encouragement from God to his people.

It reminds us of some really important Christian truths:

We are known by God.

He has plans for our lives.

And his plans for us are good.

Jesus fleshed out these truths for us in his teaching:

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught that God knows even the number of hairs on our head.

There is nothing about us hidden from him –
even the things we keep hidden deep down inside,
the hopes we dare not share
or the dark secrets we try to hide.

In the lives of his followers, Jesus showed his planning for their lives:

To Peter: “You are the rock upon which I will build my church”

To the disciples: “I will make you fishers of men”

To the church: “You will be my witnesses”

And alongside the warnings he gave his followers of hardship and suffering, he promised his presence, the help of the Holy Spirit and a glorious future in the Kingdom.

We are known by God.

He has plans for our lives.
And his plans are good.

Are we willing to seek them out and walk in them?

But I wonder if this passage from Jeremiah may have special relevance to some of us today?
Or may take on particular significance at certain points in our lives?

Some of us may feel that right now we are in Babylon.

It may be as a result of our own sin; we've turned our back on God, like sheep we have gone astray. And God has allowed us to reap the consequences of our actions.

Not because he is a vindictive God, but rather because he needs to bring us to our senses, to help us see the error of our ways, and to turn us back to him.

Maybe we are sitting by the rivers of Babylon wondering, is this it?

Is it over?

Surely there can be no way back?

And maybe we need to hear the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

"For surely I know the plans I have for you" says the Lord. "Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

There can be a return from Babylon to the Promised Land –

If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7.14)

Some of us may feel that right now we are in Babylon.

And it may be that we have got there by circumstances beyond our control.

Life has gone wrong – maybe seriously so.

Others have caused us deep pain.

Our faith, which once was so sure and steadfast is hanging by a thread.

And we look back to times past; when we 'walked on the mountaintops of Israel and drank from the overflowing vats and were satisfied with milk and honey'.

And we think – how did I get here?

What has happened?

Where is God in all this?

And maybe we need to hear the words of the prophet Jeremiah:

"For surely I know the plans I have for you" says the Lord. "Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

There can be a return from Babylon to the Promised Land –

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out (Matthew 12.40).

And some of us may feel right now the pain of those we love being in Babylon.

Our husbands, wives, children, parents, who have turned their back on the Lord.

And we weep for them as they reap the consequences of their actions.

And we wonder what hope there is for them.

And maybe we need to hear the words of the prophet Jeremiah for them:

“For surely I know the plans I have for you” says the Lord. “Plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”

There can be a return from Babylon to the Promised Land –

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4.6-7).

My message for you today, is this: “have faith”!

It didn't look good for the Israelites as they sat by the rivers of Babylon. As they wept over what they had lost and endured the taunts of their captors.

But as they set their eyes not on their current circumstances, but on the promises on God, then hope could begin to stir in their souls.

It is not without reason that the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says:

“Fix your eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.”