



SEASONS OF OUR LIVES

DASHED HOPES

When Our Best-Laid Plans Fall Apart

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Contents

Introduction 4

God's Promise 6

Jesus' Suffering 18

A Way in the Wilderness 30

Introduction

Alive in the Word brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume is one of several volumes that explore the theme of **Seasons of Our Lives**. While the Scriptures remain constant, we have the opportunity to find within them a fresh message as we go through life facing various challenges. Whether the circumstances in our lives change due to our own decisions or due to the natural process of aging and maturing, we bring with us the actual lived experiences of this world to our prayerful reading of the Bible. This series provides an opportunity to acknowledge our own circumstances and find how God continues to work in us through changing times.

God's Promise



Begin by asking God to be with you in your prayer and study. Then read through Jeremiah 29:4-14, a prophecy of God's promises.

Jeremiah 29:4-14

⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their fruits. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters. Increase there; do not decrease. ⁷Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you; pray for it to the LORD, for upon its welfare your own depends. ⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not be deceived by the prophets and diviners who are among you; do not listen to those among you who dream dreams, ⁹for they prophesy lies to you in my name; I did not send them—oracle of the LORD.

¹⁰For thus says the LORD: Only after seventy years have elapsed for Babylon will I deal with you and fulfill for you my promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know well the plans I have in mind for you—oracle of the LORD—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope. ¹²When you call me, and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. ¹³When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me—oracle of the LORD—and I will change your lot; I will gather you together from all the nations and all the places to which I have banished you—oracle of the LORD—and bring you back to the place from which I have exiled you.

*After a few moments of quiet reflection on the passages, consider the following background information provided in *Setting the Scene*.*

Setting the Scene

We are people who plan. Whether we are organized list-makers or hopeful daydreamers, humans are creatures who make plans. Our ability to forecast thoughts into the future means that we prepare—for today, this week, next month, or years down the road. Our intentions are admirable: we want to make good things happen. Even when we stumble, we try to pick ourselves up. Jeremiah 29:11 is commonly quoted by Christians to encourage and console one another when the future seems uncertain or the present feels difficult. “Don’t worry!” we tell

each other (or ourselves). “God has a plan, and everything will work out fine.”

But what happens when we see heaps of evidence to the contrary? We look at the best-laid plans we had for our lives, and we see shattered hopes. A devastating diagnosis. The loss of a job. A painful divorce. The death of a loved one. A terrible accident. The aftermath of a broken relationship. How can God be good and faithful,

and yet our lives hold so much suffering? Where do we find hope when everything falls apart?

Taking a closer look at Jeremiah’s well-known words about God’s plans can help us to see these verses in new light. As a prophet, Jeremiah spoke to people threatened by uncertainty and despair.

The people of Israel were defeated by the Babylonians in the sixth century BC and sent into exile, their lives disrupted and displaced far from their homeland. The verses in this passage are part of a letter sent by Jeremiah “to the remaining elders among the exiles, to the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon” (Jer 29:1). To be in exile is to live daily within waylaid plans and dashed hopes. The call to speak a word of hope and comfort to people surrounded by fear and danger would have been a daunting task.



So it is no surprise that Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet, unsure of his ability and uncertain that he could respond to God's plans. When the word of the Lord came to him as a youth and called him to speak to his people, Jeremiah leapt to protest: "I do not know how to speak. I am too young!" (Jer 1:6). But God reassured the young man not to be afraid, "for I am with you to deliver you" (1:8). Even the prophet's call was not planned out in detail. Yet God still promised to be with him and to place in his mouth the words he needed to speak—words that resonate for us in our own uncertainty today.

The entire passage will be considered a few verses at a time. The questions in the margins are for discussion with others. If you are using these materials on your own, use the questions for personal reflection or as a guide to journaling.

Understanding the Scene Itself

⁴Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their fruits. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters. Increase there; do not decrease. ⁷Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you; pray for it to the LORD, for upon its welfare your own depends.

These verses offer the kind of clear, unmistakable instructions that we often long for in our lives, especially when trying to pick up the pieces of our broken plans. Through Jeremiah's prophecy, God tells the people exactly what to do and where to do it. But imagine how shocking these words would have sounded to the Israelites in exile. God is telling them to stay put—not to revolt against their captors or rush to return to their homeland. Amid their own shattered dreams, God asks the people to consider yet another upended plan: to stay when they want to leave.



When have you found yourself far from home, physically or emotionally? How did you try to create a new life for yourself in an unfamiliar place?

In this section God states that those in exile in Babylon should carry on with life as normal. Build homes and plant gardens: settle where you are. Marry and have children: keep growing your families. Seek the welfare of the city around you and pray for it: be people who work for good, no matter where you are. The images here are vivid and hopeful, echoing the stories of creation in which God commanded man and woman to increase and be fertile (Gen 1:28-29) and to cultivate and care for the garden (Gen 2:15). God's instructions are also ordinary, affirming the work that has always been given to humans to do. But the context is surprising: within the land of your captors, continue with your labors as usual. Keep

doing what you have been doing, even in this place of exile.

Yet it is important to note that God's words are addressed to the people as a whole. The "you" in these verses is plural. So God's instructions are communal: this is what the people are called to do together. This point is not simply a grammatical detail; it is essential for understanding the whole passage from Jeremiah. Quite often in Scripture, God is speaking to the people as a whole, not offering specific and particular answers to an individual's questions. This might seem maddening when we want clear signs for what to do, especially when our best-laid plans seem to be falling apart. But what God promises is faithfulness—to all of us. God's plans for our lives are about community and relationship. We will not have a future free of pain or suffering, but we will never be left alone.

⁸For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not be deceived by the prophets and diviners who are among you; do not listen to those among you who dream dreams, ⁹for they prophesy lies to you in my name; I did not send them—oracle of the LORD.

¹⁰For thus says the LORD: Only after seventy years have elapsed for Babylon will I deal with you and fulfill for you my promise to bring you back to this place.

After God speaks to the people about how they are to live while in exile, the next verses establish God's truth in opposition to false

When has God asked you to keep going, even when you want nothing more than to change the circumstances around you?

prophets. Jeremiah seeks to encourage fidelity among the people: stay faithful to God; don't listen to others. Earlier in the book of Jeremiah, the false prophet Hananiah declared that within only two years, the Lord would break the yoke of the king of Babylon and set the people free from exile (Jer 28). But Jeremiah quickly confronted this lie: "Listen to this, Hananiah! The Lord has not sent you, and you have led this people to rely on deception" (Jer 28:15). So God's words in verses 8-9 affirm the rightness of Jeremiah's actions and warn the people of the dangers of false prophets.

When have you been tempted to listen to others instead of God? How have you felt God calling you back to truth?

Yet Jeremiah is still faced with delivering a daunting message: it will be seventy more years before the people are brought back from exile. As if their present despair were not enough to waylay their plans, the prospect of seventy more years of exile likely dashed their hopes further. Generations will pass before God's people know freedom in their homeland again.

Disappointment and disbelief paint the backdrop that sets the stage for Jeremiah's famous verse that follows. His words about God's plans are meant to give hope, but within exile's context of deep longing and long suffering. Jeremiah's words offer no quick fix or easy encouragement. Instead they remind the people of God's lasting promise of faithfulness over the long arc of history.

Looking back over your life, how has God been faithful to you in ways you could not see at the time?

¹¹For I know well the plans I have in mind for you—oracle of the LORD—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope. ¹²When you call me, and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. ¹³When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me—oracle of the LORD—and I will change your lot; I will gather you together from all the nations and all the places to which I have banished you—oracle of the LORD—and bring you back to the place from which I have exiled you.

The particular phrasing of Jeremiah's famous verse 11 is worth considering: "I know well the plans I have in mind for you." Knowing is a force of God's creative capacity and control over the future, described at the beginning of the book of Jeremiah as the power behind the prophet's own call: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you" (Jer 1:5). What is known in the mind of God are plans for goodness: plans for "welfare and not for woe" and for "a future full of hope." It is no surprise that these comforting and consoling words have become a source of encouragement throughout the centuries. Jeremiah's words establish our expectations about God's plans for our lives: they will be good and full of hope.



*"Knowing" is a
force of God's
creative capacity
and control over
the future.*

But these plans and promises are addressed to the people as a whole, not as individuals. As earlier in the passage, “you” here is plural and collective—meaning that God has plans of hope for us communally, as the people of God. God’s words can speak to each of us within our own lives, but the promises of goodness are made for all of us together: our shared future that is established by our relationship with God and based on the hope of redemption. Fittingly, the focus of these verses shifts quickly to a reminder of the basic dynamics of the relationship between God and people. When we call, come, and pray to God, God will listen to us. When we look and seek, we will find God. The repetition of the refrain “oracle of the LORD” (a phrase translated elsewhere as “word of the Lord” or “it is Yahweh who speaks”) underscores again and again that this is God’s word of truth, worthy of trust. God’s promise, then, is not that our future will be free from suffering, but that we will never be abandoned. God’s good plans are not a detailed personal blueprint or a guarantee

of a trouble-free life, but a promise of faithful relationship given to all of God’s people.

When has a community of faith helped you to seek and find God?



We might be frustrated by the collective nature of God's promise when we desire clarity and guidance for our personal questions. Especially when our lives fall apart and our plans lie in pieces, we can be tempted to beg God for specific answers and clear signs pointing forward. But we are offered something else instead: a promise that we are part of a community in lifelong relationship with God. This relationship with God is the heart of Scripture, the promise is that God will always be with us, listening to us and gathering us back together.

Within the context of exile, Jeremiah's words offer a promise of deliverance: to gather the people together and bring them back to the homeland for which they long (v. 14). Within the Christian context of salvation history, the coming of Christ at the end of time promises to do the same for God's faithful ones. Ultimately the prophet called his people—and calls us today—to trust in God. This relationship is what defines a future full of hope.

What do you imagine God's plans for hope look like for our world today?

Praying the Word / Sacred Reading

Return to the passage in Jeremiah 29:4-14, reading it carefully and prayerfully. What words or phrases speak to you? Let yourself linger with these words or phrases as you let God speak to you.

Choose one line or phrase from this passage—something different from the well-known verse 11. Write it down on a small piece of paper, and tape it on your bedroom mirror or carry it in your pocket. Try to memorize the verse or phrase over the next few weeks.

Whenever you start to feel anxiety, fear, or despair over the struggles in your life, repeat the line to yourself. Start to hear how God may be speaking to you through these words from Jeremiah, perhaps offering you a wider perspective on your past suffering or your present problems. Let the Scripture become a new refrain in your head, a comforting reminder that God promises to listen when you call and to be found when you go seeking.

Living the Word

Sometimes one word is enough to change the course of our life's plans. *Foreclosure. Cancer. Rejection. Infertility. Relapse. Depression.*

But sometimes one word is enough to keep us going. *Hope. Love. Help. Comfort. Healing. Community. Forgiveness.*

As you go about your week, listen for a word that can remind you of God's good plans and promises, a word "for your welfare and not for woe," a word that speaks of "a future full of hope." Perhaps you will hear this word in a conversation with family or friends, in the flow of your daily work, or in a moment of quiet prayer. Maybe you will be startled by a Scripture read-

ing at Mass or a song on the radio that jolts you awake during your commute.

Remember God's promises: "When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me—oracle of the LORD—and I will change your lot" (Jer 29:13-14). See what word is waiting for you when you stop to listen.