

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Grateful and Contented...in Babylon**

(Jeremiah 29)

Study #9

### **Sermon series: Faithful**

(Stories from Jeremiah)

#### **Introduction: Exiles...**

Exile - even the word sounds ugly. To be *exiled* is to be forcibly removed from one place to another.

Most often, exile removes you from the place where you are most comfortable, the place where you most want to be, the place where you “fit”, to another, very different place.

We could put together a long, tragic list of historical exile.

- Near the end of the first Christian century, Rome *exiled* the Apostle John to the island of Patmos for his outspoken service to Jesus.
- During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Soviet Union sent millions of Russians into *exile* within the country, often to Siberian work camps/gulags.
- Currently, China is *exiling* from their homes, members of the Uighur people (they are Muslims) to detention camps within China.
- Africans were *exiled* to Great Britain, the Caribbean Islands, and to America as slaves.

Throughout history, political dissidents, hated minorities, people who threaten the ruling powers, and unwanted populations have been exiled from their homeland.

To be exiled is to be forced to live among people you don't want to be with, and to do things you don't want to do in a place you don't want to be.

For most of us, a sense of who we are is very much determined by the place we are in and the people we are with. When these things change - violently and forcibly - who are we?

The person who is exiled often loses a sense of worth and identity. “*I am a cast-off. I don't 'fit' here.*”

And it doesn't matter if the place of exile boasts better weather or a higher standard of living. It isn't *home*.

The place of *exile* and the place of *home* are polar opposites.

Home is where we are comfortable. There are familiar sights, smells, sounds - and especially familiar people. Exile takes someone away from all of that.

Whether or not you have experienced a literal exile, we all know what it is to be in a place we would rather not be. We are all sometimes around people we wouldn't choose to be with. We all face unpleasant situations we'd rather avoid.

The sense of exile isn't unknown to any of us. Given at least a partial familiarity with exile, we wonder, “*How do we live when we find ourselves in a place where we don't 'fit' or in a season away from home? How do we live through an exile?*”

It's a good question and we find help with the question when we turn to the life and times the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah.

He lived during a time when a large group of Jews found themselves exiled to a place they desperately didn't want to be. So, he wrote them a letter, and that letter speaks to us, today.

The instructions in that letter told them how to live in exile. Those instructions will prove surprisingly helpful to us, today, who are living in a time of disruption and brokenness.

We read some details about their exile at the beginning of Jeremiah 29.

### **An Exile for the People of God (Jeremiah 29:1-2)**

#### **History of the Jewish Exile**

***[Jeremiah 29:1] Now these are the words of the letter which Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. [2] (This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the court officials, the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.)<sup>1</sup>***

So, the long-threatened deportation from Israel to Babylon has happened. It was an exile that many of Israel's prophets had been warning about for generations. They told the people, *"If you don't turn back to God, He will send you out of the good land of Israel."*

The people continued in their rebellion, so the exile came.

But, as was clear from what I just read, this exile came in stages.

First, the Babylonians carted off King Jehoiakim, the queen mother and most of the leading citizens of Jerusalem. Then, they removed the civic leaders, the priests, and the prophets.

Very purposefully, the Babylonians selected the movers and shakers of society for exile. They impoverished Israel by the ones they took away while they left many people behind in Israel.

Our focus today is not on the ones left behind. Today, we are concerned with the exiles - those who found themselves in Babylon.

They were uprooted from the place where they were born. They were forced to leave the land their forefathers had been promised by God.

They traveled seven hundred miles from Palestine to Babylon, a journey that would have taken several long, hard months.<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly, Jeremiah was one of those who had been left behind. He was still living with the refugees who had also been left behind in Palestine. We believe that he wrote his letter four years after the second round of exiles had left Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

So, what would the Jewish exiles have found when they arrived in Babylon. Well, they would have found what exiles have always found in the new place: There's no place like home.

#### **Character of the Jewish Exile**

In Babylon, the landscape was flat and featureless. And, yes, in Israel there were the coastal plains leading to the Mediterranean.

But in Israel there was the beautiful Hill Country. There was nothing like that in or near Babylon. Nothing but miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles of endless plains.

The climate was different. It was mercilessly hot. The culture and the customs of the people were strange. The language was weird.

Plus, the Babylonian looked odd and looked at the Jews as if THEY looked odd.

The food they ate would have been to the Jewish palate (as my grandchildren would say) *"Yucky."*

Buildings were made of kiln-dried bricks rather than the sturdy stone of Palestine. And we can

We can imagine the Jews thinking, *"The schools here are sub-standard. There are no decent places to worship."*

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<sup>2</sup> The rest of the populace was left behind under the puppet king, Zedekiah.

<sup>3</sup> Isn't it interesting that Jeremiah was left behind? He had been ignored for so long by the leaders that the Babylonians did not consider him important enough to exile.

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<sup>1</sup> See 1 Kings 24:10-17 for the historical account of this deportation.

If we want to know how the exiles felt, all we need to do is remember the last time we were asked (or forced) to spend extended time with people we didn't like, doing something we didn't enjoy, in a place we would rather not have been.

Remember THAT and you know just a little bit about how the Jews in exile were feeling.

They wanted to go home. They hadn't chosen Babylon. Babylon was forced on them and they were put off-balance. They were convinced that the only way to regain balance was to get back home to Israel.

It was to this people in exile that the prophet Jeremiah wrote his letter. (29:1) He wrote to give them ***“the word of the Lord”*** which would tell them how to survive while in exile.

But Jeremiah wasn't the only one claiming to bring ***“the word of the Lord”*** to these exiles.

There were three Jews in Babylon who were speaking to their fellow Jews. Unlike Jeremiah, these so-called “prophets” were in Babylon. They are exiles, in exile, speaking to fellow exiles.

### Messages to the Exiles

#### Messages from Three “prophets”

These three men are listed in the second half of Jeremiah 29. Their names are Ahab and Zedekiah<sup>4</sup> (addressed in verses 21-23) and Shemaiah (addressed in verses 24-32).

These men called attention to the unfairness of the Jews' plight. Their message was the message people in exile most want to hear.

*“Yes, Jerusalem is what we must get back to...Hang in there, folks, and we'll all get back home. This exile can't last much longer.*

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<sup>4</sup> Not King Zedekiah, who was ruling Judah in Jehoiakim's absence, but another Zedekiah, the son of Maasaiah.

*“We surely don't deserve such a life as we have here in Babylon and God will surely release us to return to Palestine. Soon.”*

We can hear them speaking to the broken hearts of the exiles, *“Justice will prevail!”*, they cried! *“You will all be home by Christmas!”*

We can almost imagine them describing dreams and visions God has given them of a triumphant return to Jerusalem after a quick end to the misery of exile.<sup>5</sup>

The three prophets in Babylon declared with certainty that happy days were just around the corner, that Babylon would soon be a speck in their rear-view mirrors, and that a return home was in their immediate future.

This was the message that homesick exiles were hearing from the self-appointed prophets in Babylon.

Then we come to the letter that Jeremiah wrote.

#### The Message from the Prophet Jeremiah

***[3] The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah,<sup>6</sup> whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon...***

These two men - Elasah and Gemariah - were God-fearing Jews carrying official correspondence between Jerusalem and Babylon.

They were sympathetic to Jeremiah's message, and so were happy to stop off for a visit with the exiles on the way to the palace to read Jeremiah's letter to them out loud.

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<sup>5</sup> Another man - Hananiah - was saying similar things back in Jerusalem. His message was that God would quickly break the yoke of slavery they were suffering. Read about it in Jeremiah 28.

<sup>6</sup> Both men were from priestly families that had played an important part in King Josiah's reforms, twenty-five years earlier.

The letter was from Jeremiah. More properly, his letter, as opposed to the messages from the other “prophets”, was from the Lord.

In this letter are instructions to these people who found themselves where they didn’t want to be, living among people they didn’t want to be around, wanting nothing more than to go home.

The letter’s message was shocking. Jeremiah’s message could not have provided a more marked contrast to the message proclaimed by the three prophets in Babylon.

*Build houses and live in them (v. 5)*

**[4] “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile<sup>7</sup> from Jerusalem to Babylon, [5] ‘Build houses and live in them.**

By this time, the Jewish exiles had been living in Babylon for at least four years. They were still living in temporary housing, in ramshackle huts or tents.

Think of the refugee camps we sometimes see in Africa or in the Middle East. Obviously, these Jews thought that they were on an extended camping trip.

Jeremiah says, *“You are not camping. Make yourself at home. Go to Lowe’s or Home Depot and find out how homes are built in Babylon. You know how to gather stones; now learn how to make bricks. Build yourself a nice, sturdy Babylonian home. Make it with a good, solid foundation. You’re going to be there for a long time.”*

Jeremiah delivered the death blow to thoughts of a quick return to Jerusalem. They are to settle down and to settle in for the long haul.

*Plant gardens and eat from them (v. 5)*

**[4] “Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, [5]...plant gardens and eat their produce.**

For four years the Jews had engaged in subsistence living. “Why plant a garden?” they thought. “We’ll be back in Jerusalem before the tomatoes ripen. We won’t be here for the harvest. Why bother sowing?”

Jeremiah assures them that they will have plenty of opportunity to eat the produce of the gardens they plant.

*“Plant vegetables. Shoot, plant fruit and shade trees. Your grandkids will eat the fruit and sit in the shade of the trees you plant.”*

They were going to be in Babylon a long time, a long enough time that they would need to learn a different way to farm.

In Palestine, regular rains provided all the water the crops needed. It was different in Babylon. Its desert climate required irrigation from the mighty Euphrates River and the nearby Tigris River.

Jeremiah was calling the Jews to become productive members of the Babylonian economy. Farmers. Citizens. Contributors.

When they thought that they were going home soon, there was no motivation to engage in committed, faithful work in Babylon. Jeremiah assures them that the exile will last a long time. Seventy years. (v. 10)<sup>8</sup>

Four years down. Sixty-six more year to go. They are to begin to enter into the rhythm of the Babylonian seasons, learn how to work with Babylonian soil and weather. This is home.

They are to learn Babylonian business practices. Learn Babylonian recipes and cook them. Learn to love the food.

<sup>7</sup> Note the words from God, **“I have sent into exile...”** Babylon wasn’t ultimately responsible for the exile. God, the Shepherd of Israel, was. (see also verse 7)

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, Jeremiah knew this by revelation from God. But the fact that he could see the exile ending this quickly (i.e. - Babylon relinquishing power that quickly) is remarkable.

This is all radical stuff. Jeremiah's letter completely contradicts the words of the Jewish prophets in Babylon. And there was more.

*Raise families (v. 6)*

***[6] Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease.***

This letter would have been heard and read by young men who were ready to marry and to begin families. These young men had been thinking, *"I'll put off getting married until next year when I can return to Jerusalem for a proper wedding."*

Jeremiah says, *"Don't put it off. Marry now. Raise children here in Babylon who will grow up into adulthood and will, themselves, marry in Babylon."*

This was a crushing blow to these people who had their hearts set on a wedding venue in the Hill Country of Judea.

We know of lots of engaged couples in 2020, worldwide, who have had their own dreams dashed when it comes to what their wedding would look like. Our hearts go out to them. Their plight helps us personalize the suffering of the ancient Jews living in Babylon.

Jeremiah has left them with no doubt that life as they had known it in Palestine is over. They're not in Israel anymore (much less, Kansas, Dorothy...).

They are in Babylon. They might as well start thinking of themselves as Babylonian Jews.<sup>9</sup>

*Seek the welfare (shalom) of Babylon (v. 7)*

***[7] 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.'***

The Hebrew word used here, the word we translate "welfare", is *shalom*. Of course, "shalom" means "peace" - but it means more than our word "peace" usually communicates.

It speaks of an absence of conflict PLUS health PLUS prosperity PLUS safety.

***"Seek the welfare of the city"*** means that the exiled Jews were to be vitally concerned for the prospering of all things Babylonian.

*"Throw yourselves into the life of the city. Go to neighborhood pot-lucks and throw block parties. Go to Chamber of Commerce meetings. Run for City Council. Do everything you can to promote justice and prosperity. Prayerfully, do what you do for the city on God's terms."*

No doubt, this would have been jarring advice for the exiles to accept. To this point, they had probably been praying for Babylon's downfall. Jeremiah says, *"No. Pray blessing on Babylon."*

Of course, as God had long promised, the long-term future of the Jews was in Jerusalem. But that future is generations away.

The short-term future of the exiles - the rest of the lives of the exiles to whom Jeremiah is writing - is in Babylon. And, while they are there, they are to do the best they can there.

### **Summary:**

Jeremiah's letter was both a contradicting rebuke to the three "prophets" in Babylon and a revolutionary challenge to the exiles. Here is his message to these people who were absorbed in self-pity.

*"There is no future in feeling sorry for yourselves. Make it your aim, not to be as comfortable as possible, but to live as well as possible and to trust God as deeply as possible."*

<sup>9</sup> Some believe that Jeremiah is urging that the Jews in Babylon intermarry with Babylonians. While this is possible, I think it less likely, unless a Jew was marrying a Babylonian who was willing to become a Jew.

*“You didn’t do very well at that assignment back in Jerusalem, did you? That’s why you are here in Babylon. So, live godly and deeply here. You’re going to be here for a long time. Make the best of it. Don’t just muddle along, waiting for a miraculous rescue. Live fully here and now!”*

*“The only chance you will ever have to live by faith in God is here and now. This may not be your choice place. But it is a place. Your life, here and now, is as valid as it ever was back home in Jerusalem.”*

That was the word of the Lord to the exiles in Babylon. Words of rebuke and words of challenge.

But Jeremiah’s letter also contained words of promise. He wrote to the exiles about God’s wonderful plans for them.

*Hope - God is in it (He is in the exile)!*

***[29:11] ‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.’***

And then he writes this, following that reassuring promise -

***[29:12] ‘Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. [13] ‘You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. [14] ‘I will be found by you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.’***

Those words envision a moment of return for the exiles. That would be a moment when they returned to the Lord in their hearts which would lead to His returning them to Palestine.

I believe that it was this letter from Jeremiah that shaped the exile experience for the Jews in Babylon.

The Babylonian exile could have been the end of the Jews. As a people, they were hanging on by their fingernails. Humanly speaking,

the exile could have made the Jews an historical footnote as irrelevant as the Philistines and the Amorites.

But God used Jeremiah’s letter to awaken these exiles to new possibilities. Living out what Jeremiah wrote, they didn’t simply survive in Babylon. They thrived.

Jarred out of their unhappiness with exile by Jeremiah’s letter, they began to search for what it might mean to be God’s people in the one place - Babylon - they didn’t want to be, with the people - Babylonians - they didn’t like, doing things - Babylonian things - they didn’t want to do.

Because they began that search, they didn’t lose their identity, they found it. In exile, they...

- ...learned to pray deeper and more genuinely.
- ...wrote and copied and pondered the Law and the prophets, discovering the richness of the Scriptures.
- ...found that God was not tied to a place or to a certain culture or to a set of circumstances.
- ...found depths to their life with God they had never thought possible.
- ...lost everything they thought was important - and found God.

They did not become dull. Exile sharpened them. Exile brought out the best in them.<sup>10</sup> The word of the Lord had its intended result - and the Jews lived.

Not that they all accepted what Jeremiah had to say. With some of the Jews, the nay-sayers, his words went over like a lead balloon.

### **Conclusion:**

*Nay-sayers...*

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<sup>10</sup> As William Faulkner observed, “It’s hard believing, but disaster seems to be good for people.” Quoted in Eugene Peterson’s Run with the Horses.

One of the false prophets we heard from earlier, Shemaiah, rejected Jeremiah's letter outright. He mocked Jeremiah for saying that the Jews would be in Babylon for a long time and urged his fellow-exiles in Babylon to rebuke Jeremiah. (Jeremiah 29:29-32)<sup>11</sup>

But, by refusing to accept Jeremiah's "**word of the Lord**", Shemaiah fanned the flames of discontentedness for everyone. Seeing only the ideal, he refused the real and chose to live in the land of denial.

Shemaiah and all those like him never learn the lesson of gratitude and contentment.

Instead, they grumble and gripe and complain and mourn what used to be. They revel in partially true memories of the good ol' days.

There's no future to being a nay-sayer to what's really going on. Better to accept reality as it is. Listen to Jeremiah. Better to be a yay-sayer who finds life in faithfully accepting the real.

*Yay-sayers...*

It is hard to accept the message, "*Be grateful and contented*" when living in the less than ideal. But that is Jeremiah's message to us, today, as much as it was to the Jewish exiles in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, BC.

He would say to us: *Accept your situation as the place where God wants you. Accept the people around you as the people God wants you to be around. Live well there. Love well now.*

You and I are certainly not living in the Garden of Eden, nor have we ever lived in the Garden.

There are problems everywhere, and brokenness is obvious all around us. Humanity has been exiled from how life was supposed to be, just as each one of us has faced a lifetime of exile.

- Babies are exiled from the safety and comfort of their mother's womb and are launched into life in strange and harsh surroundings.
- Children are exiled from their homes into the unfamiliar world of school.
- We grow up and are exiled from school and home to make our way the best we can in the world of work.

Each exile experience (being where we don't want to be; being around people we don't want to be with; having to do what we'd rather not do) forces a decision:

Exile offers us a choice to say either -

*"I don't like it here and now. I don't like this situation. I don't like these people. I want to be back there (wherever 'there' is), where I was a few years ago, with those people. I'll settle for mediocrity and complacency here, until things change. Until God provides what I long for, I refuse to call THIS home. I reject contentment."*

OR

*"I will do my best with what is here. I accept this reality. Far more important than this place's particulars of climate, economy, neighbors, and politics is the God of this place. God loves the people of this place and I accept the assignment to also love them. If that is what it means to be fully alive and fully faithful, by God's grace, that is what I'll do."*

Normal, everyday life is filled with distractions and disruptions. Challenges are everywhere - and then come the catastrophes of COVID-19, lockdowns, illness. There is the death of a loved one, political upheaval, an accident, a job loss, a divorce.

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<sup>11</sup> "*Within two years, the exile will be over, and the Jews will bring back all the treasure taken from the house of the Lord.*" (28:11), so said Hananiah, another false prophet. Instead, Jeremiah rebuked him for his lies and Hananiah died within the year.

These are exile experiences. Our lives are rearranged without anyone consulting us or asking permission. All of a sudden, we are no longer at home.<sup>12</sup>

We all experience these moments (or days, months, or years) of exile. What will we do with them? Wish we were someplace else? Complain? Escape into fantasies?

Or will we build and plant and marry and seek the shalom / peace of the place we are in and the people we are with?

Thanksgiving Day is just around the corner, and this is my Thanksgiving sermon.

Thanksgiving goes hand in hand with contentment, both as easy as falling off a log when life is sweet. Both are challenging, though, when we face exile or pandemic or any other catastrophe.

Let's all agree to NOT focus our attention on what is wrong with the world and feel sorry for ourselves. Let's agree to focus our energies on how we can, by God's grace, live at our best in this place, at this time.

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<sup>12</sup> Israel's exile was a violent, extreme form of what all of us experience from time to time.