



## The Plan of God in the Suffering We Experience

### *The Story of Scripture – Part 18*

I love reading through the Bible with you, using this Bible Reading Plan we started back in February, going through the story of Scripture through November with just a couple chapters a day. If you haven't been following along, we invite you to start following along now. Just jump in with us. Or if you trailed off at some point, pick back up this week. All the information is on the front page of our website. Every day we have the opportunity to hear the same word from God, then each Sunday we come together and think about what God is saying to us, not just individually, but together as a church.

This has led us to a chapter from our Bible reading yesterday—Jeremiah 29—that includes one of the most well-known, often-quoted, most-misunderstood and taken-out-of-context promises in the entire Bible. I've never preached on this passage before and when we came to this week, I thought we need to think about what this means, because what this means is incredible, particularly when we wonder how suffering we experience in this world relates to the plan of God for our lives. This passage is so relevant to every single one of our lives.

At the end of our time together, I want us to have some concentrated time to pray for people in this gathering who are walking through challenging days right now. I want to encourage people like that particularly with God's Word today. And for those of you who are not walking through some sort of suffering right now, I want to give you truths to tuck away in your mind and heart in preparation for anything that might be coming around the corner.

Let's read these verses together, then let's think about what they mean. Jeremiah 29:11-13:

*<sup>11</sup> For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.*

I mentioned that these words are well-known and often quoted. People have them in frames around their houses, on their desks, in places where they can be reminded of these words, particularly verse 11, and this is good. The problem, though, is that many of us don't know when God said this, who He was speaking to, or what it meant at that time. If we don't know what it meant when God said these words, then we can easily make them mean things today that they were never intended by God to mean.

All kinds of people can find themselves suffering. When you find out you have cancer, when your spouse decides to leave, when you're a child or teenager and one of your parents is suddenly absent from your life, then you wonder, "I thought God's plans for me were good." Or even in the middle of tough times, people will quote this verse and say, "I have faith that my suffering is about to end, because God promised it." But is that what this passage means?

This is why it's always important that we read and understand the Bible in context and why it's particularly helpful to read the Bible like we're reading it together here. We need to understand when God says this in the story of Scripture.

So to bring everybody up to speed, in the Old Testament—the first part of the Bible—as a result of sin and division among God's people, they were split into two kingdoms. There was a Northern Kingdom called Israel and a Southern Kingdom called Judah. Both of these kingdoms were sinking into deep idolatry and immorality, worshiping all kinds of gods and indulging in all kinds of sins. So God sent prophets to both Israel and Judah, saying, "The judgment of God is coming upon your sin. Turn back to Him." Over a hundred times in this book, through Jeremiah, God calls His people to repent and return to Him. But they don't listen—kind of like us sometimes. God's Word calls us to live a certain way, but over and over again we still choose our own way. We don't listen.

So what happens? We read about this over this past week, as Assyria attacked Samaria, which was the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Listen to what 2 Kings 17:6 says: "*In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria, and he carried the Israelites away to Assyria and placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.*" The people who lived in Israel—in the Northern Kingdom—were taken away as exiles from their homes as their capital and their kingdom were destroyed.

That then sets the stage for the story to shift to Jeremiah, who lived in Judah—the Southern Kingdom. For 40 years, Jeremiah declared God's word and warnings to the people of Judah, saying, "The same thing that happened to Israel is going to happen to you." But this time it wouldn't be Assyria; it was going to be Babylon. Jeremiah warns, "The Babylonians are coming." And just as Israel ignored God's warnings through the prophets, so did Judah.

In 587 B.C., which is where we left off in our reading in 2 Kings this week, Babylon overtakes Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, and takes God's people from there into exile, this time in Babylon. That is the setting behind Jeremiah 29. God's people are now scattered in Babylon, experiencing all kinds of suffering. Just imagine you and your family being taken from your home tomorrow by a foreign government into a foreign country, where you have nothing and you know no one. Don't miss this. Here's what's happening in Babylon at this point. There were false prophets who were trying to comfort

God's people by saying, "Don't worry. This suffering is not going to last long. Babylon is going to fall soon. God is going to bring us right back home."

Jeremiah writes this letter to the exiles in Babylon and God says through Jeremiah, "Don't believe those prophets." Look at Jeremiah 29:8-9, right before what we read:

*For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord.*

In fact, if you back up to verses four through seven, listen to what God says there:

*Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But 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 find your welfare.*

In other words, get comfortable; you're going to be in exile for a while. This was not necessarily encouraging news. Imagine suffering like this and instead of God saying, "I'm going to end this soon," God says, "You're going to be in this a while." In fact, if you jump down to Jeremiah 29:10, you'll see how long God tells them they'll be there. "*For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.*"

Imagine that news. "Seventy years from now," God says, "I will bring you back home." Is that encouraging to you? Most people would be dead by then. Just put yourself in the shoes of these exiles for a moment. What thoughts and emotions go through your mind and heart when you hear that your suffering is going to last for 70 years—basically the rest of your life?

And that is the context, the set-up, for Jeremiah 29:11.

Now let's see why context is so important. We think these verses are a promise that we won't go through suffering, when in reality these verses are a promise given to people who were walking through suffering. Or we think these verses are promises that suffering won't last long, that it will end soon, when in reality these verses are saying that suffering isn't ending anytime soon. So, is Jeremiah 29:11-13 good news or not? Should we have these verses plastered on our walls and put on our desks? Absolutely we should. Let me show you why.

### **Three promises to God's people then**

We now fully understand the context here. God is making promises to His people, which, as a side note, is another important point. These promises weren't just given to individuals; they were given

to God's people together. The "you" in these verses is plural. It wasn't just about individuals; it was about God's people together.

God was saying to them, first, "I will bring you through your suffering." God's people are captives in Babylon and God promised them, "There is a time limit on their suffering; I'm going to bring you through it." And "bring" is the right word here, because God promises that He is going to do this for them. If you jump down to Jeremiah 29:14, you'll notice how God is the One doing the action:

*I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.*

In other words, God's promise was not, "It's in your hands now. Hopefully you can make it out." God actually says the opposite. God says, "You're still in My hands and I am going to bring you out. I will restore your fortunes. I will gather you up and bring you back." God says, "I will take responsibility for bringing you through this."

That leads to the second promise, where God says, "I will hear your prayers to Me." This is Jeremiah 29:12: "*Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you.*" Now, the "then" at the beginning of that verse is somewhat misleading, because the picture is not that at the end of the exile, 70 years from now, they would call upon God. The picture is they would call upon God now, pray to God now and God would hear them now.

This is beautiful when you read it in the context of the rest of Jeremiah, because over and over and over again, Jeremiah talks about how God's people had totally turned from God. They had completely forgotten God. In Jeremiah 2:32, God said, "*My people have forgotten me days without number.*" But here in Jeremiah 29:12, God says to His people, "I have not forgotten you. I love you and My plans for you involve intimacy with you." This is an amazing thing for the holy God of the universe to say to sinners who warrant His wrath. God says, "I will hear your prayers to me."

Third, God says, "I will reward your pursuit of Me." Verse 13: "*You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.*" That takes us back to the memory verses in our Bible Reading Plan this week, Jeremiah 9:23-24:

*Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."*

Let me translate. It does not matter how smart you are. It does not matter how powerful you are. It does not matter how much money you have. The only thing that matters right now in your seat and forever—the only thing that matters—is if you know God. Right where you're sitting right now, I ask

you, “Do you understand and know, personally know, God?” This is the one thing that matters most in your life.

God tells His people in Jeremiah 29:13 that this can be a reality for them. They can know God. They can find God. The language is like discovering a hidden treasure, the most valuable treasure in the entire world—God Himself. God tells His people through Jeremiah, “I will reward your pursuit of Me.” So now that we understand what God was saying to them then, we can ask the question, “What is God saying to us now—you and me, as His people, reading His Word this week?”

### **Three implications for God’s people today**

Let’s look at three implications for God’s people today that flow from Jeremiah 29:11-13. First, in the middle of suffering, we can know God has good plans for us. In the middle of suffering, in the middle of situations when we wonder where God is or what God is doing, God says, “I have good plans for you, plans for your welfare.” In some translations it says, “Plans to prosper you.”

But the word that’s translated “prosper” in those translations is the same word that’s used for “welfare” back up in verse seven. It’s the Hebrew word *shalom*, which means all-encompassing peace. This is God say, “Amidst your turmoil, I have plans for your peace. Amidst your heartache and pain, know that I am plotting for your good.”

Now the key for us here is the same thing that was the key for God’s people in Jeremiah’s day. Don’t believe in false hope. Don’t believe people who tell you that God will keep you from all suffering or that God will bring you out of suffering really quickly. That’s false hope. It abounded in Jeremiah’s day and it is abounding today. It was in the mouths of prophets then and it’s in the mouths of preachers today all across our country.

Please hear me loud and clear. Many of the fastest-growing churches in our country today are built on this false hope. There’s a church that draws tens of thousands of people, and they say explicitly, “It is God’s will for every believer to become whole, healthy and successful in every area of life.” They claim that on the cross, Jesus bought for us, not just spiritual provision, but physical and financial provision. So this is not just “out there” teaching. This is mainstream, common teaching that is drawing supposedly Christian crowds.

This is not just here in the United States; it’s happening all around the world. Many of the fastest growing, supposedly Christian churches and movements, as well as best-selling, supposedly Christian books, are built on teaching that says, “God wills for you to be healthy, wealthy and prosperous in this world. God wills to keep you from all suffering, if only you will trust Him and have faith in Him. If by chance, for some reason you find yourself in suffering—maybe even because of a lack of faith—if you

will only return to God in faith, your suffering will end in a short time. Believe this. Claim this. Trust that prosperity is coming. Tell yourself this.”

It’s even the power of positive thinking. “Have faith in Jeremiah 29:11. God says, ‘I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you.’ God wills to prosper you financially, physically and otherwise, so if you’re suffering right now, you need to believe that prosperity is coming soon, because that’s what Jeremiah 29:11 teaches, right?” No, in reality Jeremiah 29:11 teaches the exact opposite. God’s people were in exile according to God’s will, and according to God’s word, their suffering in exile was not coming to an end anytime soon.

Now you might think, “I like the other message better.” That is exactly what the people in Jeremiah’s day were thinking. That’s why they were believing these false prophets. God is saying to us right now the exact same thing He was saying to them then: “Don’t believe it. Don’t put your hope in crowd-pleasing words.” Why? Because they’re not from God. Jeremiah, the prophet who is speaking the word of God, says, “Here is true hope.” Your hope is not that God wills to keep you from all suffering. That’s not at all what Jeremiah 29:11 teaches. Jeremiah 29:11 teaches that God wills to bring you through all suffering.

The context of Jeremiah 29 makes it crystal clear that suffering is a reality for God’s people in this fallen world and God’s people will not escape it. But God says to His people, “In the middle of suffering, I promise to enable you to endure it.” God does not promise in His Word that suffering will end in a short time. That is a false hope that has led all kinds of people astray, with preachers or Christians saying, “If you just believe, have faith, you will be healed soon. If you just have faith and believe, you will have financial health soon. If you just believe, your marriage will be reconciled soon. Name it, claim it. Believe it, receive it.”

Then when it doesn’t happen, when the healing doesn’t come, when the finances aren’t there, when the divorce becomes final, people are left wondering, “Did I not have enough faith?” Or worse, “Is God actually there? Or if He is there, can He actually be trusted?” But never in His Word does God promise that your suffering will end in a short time. You might ask, “Well, did God promise anything along these lines?” And the answer, although not as popular, is clear here in Jeremiah 29:11. True hope is this: God promises your suffering will end in the long term. “Exile will not be the end for you,” God tells His people, “Your suffering will not have the last word. I have good plans for you and My good plan is guaranteed to prevail in the end.”

Do you realize what this meant for God’s people in Jeremiah 29 and what it means for us as God’s people today? God’s plan calls for patient trust. Seventy years is a long time to wait. Most of us would like God to work out our problems by the end of the week, not the end of the century. This is why

these false prophets were so appealing then and it's why prosperity teaching is so popular today. But it's not true. It's a lie. What's true is that God is calling His people through His Word to patient trust.

Is it possible that suffering could end soon in this situation, that healing, a need for reconciliation? Absolutely! By the grace and power of God, it is possible. We can and should pray for that. But is it guaranteed? Absolutely not. You can't bank your life on that. God hasn't said that, no matter how good it sounds. As your pastor, I'm not going to say it, no matter how many crowds it brings or doesn't bring.

What God says is that when suffering comes, sometimes suffering stays for a while. When a child has a special need, it isn't going away anytime soon, no matter how much you name and claim. When you go to that next doctor's appointment and the cancer is worse, not better, when that relational hurt is not healing, when that grief over loss is not going away, when you see no light at the end of that dark tunnel, God says, "In the middle of a real world where these are realities, trust Me. Even when you can't see it, I have good plans for you."

Light is coming. In this fallen, hurting world, weeping may tarry for the night, but God guarantees that joy is coming in the morning. God not only guarantees that suffering will eventually come to an end, He promises to get you to that end. God's plan calls for patient trust and God's plan comes with persevering grace.

Remember the language in Jeremiah 29 here. "I will restore you. I will gather you. I will bring you back from this place." God does not say, "You're on your own in your suffering. Hopefully you can make it through this." No. God says, "You're in My hands and I take responsibility for bringing you through your suffering, which means I'm going to give you all the grace, all the strength, all the wisdom, all the help you need."

Without going into details, I think about a challenge my family is walking through right now. This week we found ourselves literally in tears, physically crying to God with the words of Psalm 121:1-2, "*I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*" We were and are just praying and pleading, "God, we need Your help." We know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God will be faithful to answer. God's plan for our lives comes with the guarantee of God's grace in our lives.

On a side note here, as we think about God's grace, just think about this with me. Jeremiah 29 is a powerful picture of God's good plans for His people when they are suffering—follow this—as a result of their sin. What God's people were experiencing in Jeremiah was not Job-like suffering. When Job suffered in the Bible—lost his possessions, his children, his health and his wife was telling him to curse God—the Bible goes out of the way to make sure we know Job did nothing specific to deserve this. The story in Jeremiah's day is the opposite. The men and women in Jeremiah's day had sinned against God

with all kinds of idolatry and immorality. That’s why they were suffering. Even though they had been completely unfaithful to God, He was still faithful to them.

So when we think about our lives, there are times when we suffer as a result of our sin. When we sin, it leads to hurt. It leads to pain. It leads to consequences. It leads to challenges in our lives and in others’ lives. Yet even in the middle of that, God says to those who trust in Him, “Despite your sin, I still have good plans for you, so your sin will not have the last word. I will bring you through this by My grace.”

Isn’t that good news? Then all the more so when we suffer in ways that have nothing to do with specific sin in our lives, when we walk through suffering that’s not directly tied to sin in our lives. Maybe someone sins against us, or we get cancer, or a child is born with a special need, or so many other circumstances. But we can know God will help us persevere by His grace. We know, based on Jeremiah 29:11, that in the middle of suffering we can know God has good plans for us.

Second, in the middle of suffering, we can know God hears all our cries. “*You will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me. When you seek for me with all your heart, I will be found by you.*” If that was true in Jeremiah 29:12-13, it’s all the more true today. Do you know why? Because—see the context again—here in the old covenant, in the Old Testament, there was indirect access to God for particular people.

If you remember, the temple had been constructed in Jerusalem as a picture of the glory of God dwelling among His people. The center of the temple was the Holy of Holies, symbolizing the presence of God. But only particular people—the high priests—could go into the Holy of Holies and then only one could go at certain times to offer sacrifices for the people’s sin. Then he had to get out. Meanwhile, the people would stand back and could not go into the presence of God. But that was going to change.

Turn two chapters over to the right to Jeremiah 31:31-34. This will be in our Bible reading tomorrow. It’s one of the most important passages in the Old Testament. Listen to what God promises through Jeremiah:

*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.*

There is so much here that we don't have time to dive into. The big-picture point is that God is saying, "A new covenant is coming, a new way of having a relationship with Me, through which I'm going to make it possible for all people to know Me directly through a sacrifice once and for all for all their sins." This is a promise of what Jesus would do when He would come as our great High Priest; when He would offer His life as a sacrifice for all of our sin.

So non-Christian friends especially visiting with us today, we are so glad you are here. Please listen particularly closely at this point. The Bible teaches us clearly that we have all sinned against God in all kinds of ways in our lives and we are all separated from God by our sin. If we die in the state of separation from God, we will spend eternity separated from God. But God loves us and has made a way for each of us to be forgiven all our sin.

God sent Jesus, God in the flesh, to live a life of perfect obedience, with no sin in Him, and then to die—not for His sin, because He had no sin, but to die for our sin, for your sin and my sin. Jesus died on a cross to pay the price for all of your sin against God, so that anyone, anywhere—including anyone in this gathering right now—who turns from their sin and puts their trust in Jesus will be saved from all your sin and you will be reconciled to a relationship with God forever. It's the greatest news in the entire world. You can have access to God.

I was with some students by the ocean this last week, looking out over the horizon. We could see it going on as far as our eyes could see. We were spending time in prayer, thinking, "I know the God Who created this, the God Who spoke. One day He said, 'Ocean' and boom! There was an ocean." Do you know why that water stops at the shoreline? Because God says, "Stop there." If God didn't say, "Stop there," but instead He said, "Stop a mile further," then where we were would be underwater. The One Who spoke the universe into existence—I know this God!

You, right where you're sitting, can know this God. You have access to God. It's the great news of the New Testament, of the new covenant. Direct access to God is available for all people through Jesus. I urge you today, if you have not turned from your sin and put your trust in Jesus, do that today.

Then for all who have, I have good news for you. When you walk through suffering, in the middle of the challenges you face, you have direct access to the God of the universe. God Himself is saying to you right now through His Word, "I personally hear every single one of your cries. I see all of your tears. I feel all your struggles. I promise to help you in every single way you need." God has good plans for us and He does not carry them out far from us. God carries out His good plans for us through intimacy with us. In suffering, God is drawing us closer and closer to Himself.

This means—the third and final truth—in the middle of suffering, we can experience supernatural joy. Look at Romans 5. I want us to connect these dots between the old covenant and the new covenant, particularly when it comes to our suffering. Watch this in Romans 5:1-8: *"Therefore, since we have been*

*justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.”* This is the gospel we just talked about, how through Jesus we have access to God.

So what’s the result of that? *“And we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings.”* This is a weird way to talk. We rejoice in our sufferings? Why? Because we know *“that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame.”*

There are all kinds of hope you can have in this world that will put you to shame. If you hope in riches, you’ll be put to shame. If you hope in a sports team, you will be put to shame. If you hope in your reputation, you’ll be put to shame. But this kind of hope does not put us to shame—why? *“Because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”*

Did you hear that? For all who are in Christ, who have access to God, we can actually rejoice in the middle of suffering—why? Because we know exactly what Jeremiah 29 is saying, that God has good plans for us, even in suffering—plans for endurance and character and hope, all of which are really good things. And our hope is in God’s love for us.

How much does He love us? Keep going and look at Romans 5:6: *“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

### **Our joy is not found in our ever-changing circumstances.**

For God’s people—specifically for all who put their trust in Jesus—our joy is not found in our ever-changing circumstances. Isn’t that good news? If our joy is dependent on what happens or doesn’t happen tomorrow, on how that doctor’s visit goes, on how that conversation with your boss goes—if our joy is dependent on decisions other people make, we will have no foundation for joy in this life. We will live our lives on sinking sand, because our circumstances are ever-changing. But God has not called us to live that way. Our joy is not found in our ever-changing circumstances.

### **Our joy is found in God’s never-changing promises.**

When your foundation is God’s never-changing promises, when your hope is built on the actual guarantees of God, not the nice-sounding lies of this world, there is surprising joy to be found, even in the midst of suffering in this world.

As I was preparing this week and meditating on this truth, I immediately thought about Casey Black, a man in the first church I pastored. He was the epitome of health on the outside. He was muscular

and fit. He worked out and ate well. He had a wife and a young daughter. One day his stomach started hurting and it didn't stop for a couple weeks. So he went to the doctor, they ran some tests and they discovered cancer in his stomach. They planned a day to operate soon after that. They opened up his stomach and the doctor saw that the cancer had spread throughout his entire body, so much that the doctor didn't do anything. He just closed Casey's stomach back up. When Casey woke up, the doctor told him, his wife and their little girl, "It's too much. There's nothing we can do." Within about two weeks, Casey's life was over.

I remember when I got the call that Casey was in the hospital and likely wouldn't make it through the night, I went to the hospital with a member of his small group. As I rode to the hospital, I kept thinking to myself, "What am I going to say?" What do you say when you feel so helpless as a pastor? "I'm so sorry this is happening, Casey. I wish this wasn't the case."

The people who came to Casey's hospital room that day were quite surprised by what they saw. When they walked into his room, like I did that night, they saw a man sitting on his death bed with a genuine, authentic smile on his face. He would point up to heaven and say, "I'm going to be with Jesus today." All of sudden, "I'm sorry" just didn't seem appropriate anymore. Neither did, "I wish this wasn't the case." We actually walked out of that hospital room that day a bit jealous, thinking, "I want to go with him."

So for Casey Black, and for all who put their hope in Jesus, you know you've put your hope in the One Who conquered the ultimate suffering—death itself. That means there is nothing—absolutely nothing, not even death itself—that can ever steal your joy.

### **Don't miss the picture.**

This is the key. The whole picture in Jeremiah 29:11-13 hinges on one Person. All of these promises, not only in Jeremiah 29, but throughout the Old Testament, hinge on one Person. They all point to one Person. In all of our Bible reading over these last few weeks, we've seen all kinds of pictures. Do you know Who they all point to? Jesus. This is like ten more sermons right here, but I'm just going to run through them.

- Jesus is the resurrected Prophet from the book of Jonah. Just as Jonah spent three days in the belly of a fish before proclaiming good news to Nineveh, in a much different and greater way, Jesus spent three days in a grave before bringing the greatest news of all to the world: death itself has been defeated.
- Jesus is the faithful Husband from Hosea who doesn't give up on His people, even when they commit adultery against Him.
- Jesus is the Burden-Bearer from Amos, Who carries the consequences of our sin for us.
- Jesus is the Restorer of the lost from Joel. He redeems the years that the locust have eaten from your life.

- Jesus is the Prince of Peace and Sacrifice for Sinners in Isaiah. He was pierced for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities and by His stripes we are healed.
- Jesus is the everlasting Ruler from Micah, promised to come from Bethlehem to be the Shepherd our souls need.
- Jesus is the Covenant Keeper from Jeremiah. Jesus is the One Who makes the hope of the new covenant a reality for you and me.

### **Don't miss the point.**

This may be the most important truth of all so don't miss this. We cannot claim Jeremiah 29:11-13 as promises for our lives in this gathering today if we are not trusting in Jesus. These are not general promises from God for anyone.

Think about it. For people right now, all around the world—even in this gathering—who are rejecting God, who have not trusted Jesus to save them from their sins, your future at this moment is not filled with hope. If this is you, you are not guaranteed that sin and suffering will end. If you die in your sin, separated from God and not having trusted in Jesus to bring you to God, then your sin and everlasting suffering will have the last word. Hope in suffering hinges on one Person—Jesus. You cannot cling to Jeremiah 29:11-13 if you will not cling to Jesus.

But for all who cling to Jesus, these promises are yours. In Jesus, you can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that even in the middle of suffering, God has good plans for you. In Jesus you can know that even in the middle of suffering, you have access to God, all His wisdom, and all His strength. His grace, His love, His everything is at your disposal.

In Jesus, you can know that even in the middle of suffering, you have surprising joy, because your joy supersedes the ever-changing circumstances of this world. Your joy is grounded in the never-changing promises of God that are yours in Jesus. We read in 2 Corinthians 1:20 that all of God's promises to us are Yes in Christ. Don't miss the point here that God keeps all of His promises in Jeremiah 29:11-13 to all who are in Jesus.

In light of this truth from God, in a gathering where I know people are walking through suffering, hurt, heartache and challenges in all kinds of different ways, I want us as a body to gather around and just pray for you. Here's what I'm going to invite us to do in just a moment. I want you to stand where you are, if you would just say by standing, "I'm walking through some difficulties right now and I would love for some people to pray for me."

You don't have to go into details—certainly not in front of everybody else or even the people right around you. But by standing, you're saying, "I'm walking through some difficulties." You might think, "Well, I don't know if mine is as bad as what others are going through." This is not about comparison. This is just you saying, "I need some extra grace in my life right now." This is a safe place. This is what the body of Christ is designed to do.

After you stand, then I will ask others of us to stand and gather around you, to put a hand on your shoulder and pray for you. Does that make sense? Does that sound good? Please stand if you would say, “I’m walking through some suffering and challenges right now and I would appreciate some people praying for me.” Whether it’s life, work, family—whatever it is—let me invite you to stand where you are. Please feel free to do this individually, as couples or families. Just say, “I need some extra grace in my life right now.”

There are brothers and sisters standing all around this room right now, so let’s stand with them. If there’s not anyone around you, stay where you are, but if there’s someone close to you, gather around and put your hand on their shoulder. Let’s begin right now praying out loud all at the same time. Even if you don’t have a hand on somebody’s shoulder, we’re going to pray out loud all at the same time for God’s grace, strength and wisdom.

You might say, “But I don’t even know what this person is going through.” God does. Pray His Word for them. Pray for His wisdom, His strength, His grace, His help for them. Pray what you would want somebody to pray for you if you were walking through something hard right now. Let’s begin right now, with our voices lifted up before God, everybody praying at the same time. Then after a couple minutes, I’ll pray for us all together. Let’s start interceding, crying out to God for each other.



O God, we lift up our brothers and sisters to You right now. God, we pray that they would feel Your presence with them as we are praying over them, that they would know that You are near to them, that they are not alone, that there is a body around them who cares for them, that You are with them, that we are a reflection of You. Even with our hands on shoulders right now, it’s a picture of Your love for them. We pray they would know that they are in Your hands.

We pray Psalm 37:24 over them, that You would uphold them with Your righteous right hand. Psalm 31:15, their times are in Your hands. O God, all our trust is in You. We look to You, we lift up our eyes to You, our Help comes from You and their help comes from You. You are the Maker of heaven and earth. So please, O God, we pray, give them all the help they need.

God, we pray for Your strength in their weakness. We pray for Your peace, Your *shalom*, in the middle of turmoil. We pray for Your joy in the middle of suffering. We pray that You would produce endurance and character and hope through this. Lord, we pray for hope on days when it seems like things are hopeless. We pray for faith on days when faith is hard to come by. We pray, O God, that You would use even this journey through trials to draw these men and women into greater intimacy with You, greater delight in You, greater trust in You, a deeper experience of Your love and comfort.

God, we pray for Your comfort. We pray for Your wisdom. We pray for Your direction. We pray for Your enablement, that You would bring them through, that You would do just what You promised to

do in Jeremiah 29. No matter whether this lasts for another day or for the rest of their lives, we pray that You would bring them through.

Jesus, we bow before You and give You glory, for You have conquered sin and have defeated suffering. You have defeated death itself. We praise You. We know that in the long term, suffering will not have the last word. In the long term, cancer will not have the last word. In the long term, hurt and heartache will not have the last word. We long for the day when we will see Your face and You will wipe every tear from our eyes. Hasten the coming of the day, we pray. Come, Lord Jesus; come quickly.

Please help us—please help these brothers and sisters specifically—to persevere until that day. Please help us all. Not one of us knows what’s coming this week. No matter what comes, help us all find our joy in Your never-changing promises and Your completely certain hope. We love You, God. We praise You, Jesus. We are so glad our lives are in Your hands. We pray for our brothers and sisters right now, in Jesus’ name. And all God’s people said, “Amen.”

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