

What You See Depends on Where You Stand When You Look

A sermon in the series

“Summer Memories: Scripture Verses Worth Remembering”

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- Luke 12:22-31 ²⁹ “So don't be all upset, always concerned about what you will eat and drink... Your Father knows that you need these things. ³¹ Instead, be concerned with his Kingdom, and he will provide you with these things.”
- Jeremiah 29:11-14a ¹¹ **I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope.** ¹² When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. ¹³ When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me. ¹⁴ I will be present for you, declares the Lord....
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Seeing the world from God's perspective we are assured that God's plan for humanity is a future filled with peace and hope.

For the final installment of my summer sermon series on “Scripture Verses Worth Remembering” I've chosen some inspiring words from the prophet Jeremiah. Really, they were meant to inspire some beaten-down, taken-advantage-of, homesick, worn-out people. Anyone feel like that at the end of a week? At the end of a weekend?

You might have memories of Sunday school or sermons where you heard verses from the Old Testament that refer to “Babylon” or “captivity” or “exile.” What, exactly, do they refer to? Let me summarize hundreds of years of history in two minutes:

In prehistoric times (which simply means before histories were recorded for future generations), God had selected a man from a nowhere place in what today we call Iraq. God selected Abraham to be the progenitor, the “father” of a nation, a people who God called to be faithful and obedient. That nation of people eventually ended up as the slaves of the Egyptians. But when hundreds of years had passed God raised up a man named Moses to challenge Pharaoh to “Let my people go!” Eventually the Hebrew people were able to escape the bonds of Egyptian slavery.

They wandered in the wilderness for a long, long time – supposedly “forty years” – as they sought to understand and obey God's will. Eventually God led them to a land that held much promise for them – a “promised land.” The Hebrew people – now called Israelites – settled there and had their ups and downs in terms of being faithful to God.

In the year 587 BC the strong Babylonian army overtook Jerusalem, looted and destroyed the Temple and town, and then took with them back to Babylon the rich and powerful and learned leaders of Israelite society. There in Babylon they lived in exile for more than two generations. The movers and shakers of Israelite society were ripped away from the familiarity and comforts and opportunities they had known back home. Meanwhile, the poor unfortunate souls who were left behind in Israel were left in ruins and without customary leadership. I

imagine that communities recently ravaged by Hurricane Harvey can relate to the plight of those devastated Israelites.

All that background puts into context today's "scripture verse worth remembering" from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah. Contrary to the old song by the group Three Dog Night, Jeremiah was not "a bullfrog"; he was a prophet, a devout man who sensed God calling him to challenge his beloved fellow Israelites when their actions and attitudes were self-serving or God-forsaking. Jeremiah warned his fellow Israelites that the consequence of preferring self-interest over God's will would be their undoing. In the year 587 BC the Babylonian armies of King Nebuchadnezzar did just that.

So in today's "scripture verse worth remembering" Jeremiah speaks words of consolation and hope to the remnant people living in destroyed Jerusalem as well as the exiled people living far from home and far from hope. Giving voice to God's heartfelt compassion for those victimized by the Babylonian army's devastation, Jeremiah wrote, "I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope."¹

If you were left looking at the Babylonian Military Police keeping an eye on you, or if you were left looking at the rubble of the Jerusalem Temple, or the rubble of your Houston neighborhood, wouldn't you hope that God has a plan for you that gives you a future filled with peace?

Last Sunday evening was the first of four fellowship and education events our church is offering this fall. We're calling the programs "Bridges" because the hope is that we'll begin to bridge some gaps in our attitudes and thinking – gaps that separate us from others and separate us from what God intends. This past Sunday the Rev. Dr. Richard Watts was the presenter. Dr. Watts guided us as we explored how we relate to people belonging to other faith traditions. He noted that religions are *not* all the same, are not simply different expressions of a common set of beliefs. He asserted that different religious traditions *don't* believe all the same things and we don't *do* all the same things. Still, in every religion there are deeply-held beliefs that we would be surprised to discover are quite similar to beliefs that we embrace. He encouraged developing relationships with people in other religious traditions as the best way to learn and appreciate and respect the people and their outlook.

As today's sermon title I used one of the expressions Dr. Watts shared which I think was based on something C.S. Lewis once wrote.² Last Sunday night Dick advised us, "What you see depends on where you stand when you look."

The people who Jeremiah was addressing had every reason to despair. The people and places and practices and possessions that defined their lives had been destroyed or carried away as the spoils of war or had been removed from them when they were exiled to a far-away and foreign land. They had no military power, no "Navy SEALs" to come to their rescue, no prospect for an end to their exiled predicament.

But Jeremiah assured them that regardless of how hopeless they imagined their prospects to be, God's intention for them, God's plan was "for peace, not disaster." God's intention was to give them "a future filled with hope." Even in the bleakness of captivity or poverty, Jeremiah urged them to entrust their lives to God. Stand with God. Know that God

¹ Jeremiah 29:11 (Common English Bible)

² "What you see and what you hear depends a great deal on where you are standing. It also depends on what sort of person you are." – C.S. Lewis, [The Magician's Nephew](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/29188-what-you-see-and-what-you-hear-depends-a-great), at <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/29188-what-you-see-and-what-you-hear-depends-a-great>, accessed 8/31/2017.

looked upon their plight with faithfulness and mercy, with forgiveness and a promise to sustain the weak, with hope and a promise that joy will not be absent forever. What they'd see would depend on where they were standing when they looked. When in their lives they stood with God they would see beyond the troubles of the present to that "future filled with hope" that God intended for them.

How might the promise to the exiled or remnant Israelites apply to us? Consider our contentious government and our squabbling society and this saber-rattling world we live in. When we strive to stand with God, what we will see is that God wills peace for us. God desires wholeness. God urges friendship and companionship. God longs for justice so that fairness and mercy will guide our interpersonal relationships and shape governmental policy. What you see depends on where you stand when you look.

Today we stand in God's house, *looking* at a table holding pieces of bread and cups of juice. But because we are standing (or sitting) in God's house, what we *see* is not simply sample sizes of bread and juice. Because we stand in the grace of God when we look, what we see is forgiveness. What we see is acceptance. What we see is the joy of fellowship. In the words of that beloved hymn "Great is Thy Faithfulness," when we stand with God and look upon this table, what we see is

Pardon for sin and a peace that [endures],
[God's] own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten-thousand beside!³

What a friend we have in Jesus, that we are invited to be part of the "future filled with hope" that God already has in sight for us. In moments or minutes or months of discouragement or despair, our faith in God through Jesus the Son gives us the strength and the hope to carry on, because by faith we know this to be true: "I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope."

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³ "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," words by Thomas Obediah Chisholm (1923), music by William Marion Runyan (1923). © 1923, renewal 1951 Hope Publishing Co., modified for this purpose.