

## **Urban Legends – Part 2**

*Jeremiah 29:11*

**The Legend:**

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- Specific people in a specific situation.

- Bad news (and good news).

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- God takes sin seriously.

- The blessing is in the relationship.

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Michael O'Neill

## Urban Legends<sup>1</sup> *Jeremiah 29:11*

What makes Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, Aliens, and UFO's so enthralling to us? Keep an eye out; any of them may show up in here – let me know if they do. Whatever it is that draws us to urban legends, the more the stories get told, the more we seem to believe them. Did George Washington say to his father “I cannot tell a lie” while confessing to chopping down a cherry tree? Did he also skip a silver dollar across the Potomac River? And did Benjamin Franklin propose that the Great Seal of the United States contain a turkey? All of these are popular myths<sup>2</sup> or urban legends. An urban legend is a commonly circulated myth, repeated throughout the culture as common knowledge, but which isn't true.<sup>3</sup>

In our summer sermon series, we are exploring some of the urban legends that have developed in the Bible and church history, and we'll do our best to try to set the record straight. In addition to dispelling myths, in the process, we will gain a more accurate understanding of God – who he is and what he does for us and through us. We will also gain a more accurate understanding of who we are and how we are to live as God's people. You might be surprised at what we discover together; there may be some passages that do not mean what you think they mean. These biblical urban legends kind of remind me of that line that Inigo Montoya says to Vizzini in that classic movie, “The Princess Bride” – “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” Whenever I hear someone using a Scripture verse out of context or using a Scripture in a way that reflects some wrong thinking, I can't help but say to myself, “You keep using that Scripture. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

So last week we looked at the verse in Proverbs 22:6. Today we are going to look at another famous Old Testament verse that has made its way into modern day myth status – let's look at **The Scripture: Jeremiah 29:11**. Just in case you don't know what that verse says, I'll put it on the screen and read it to you, although many of you will recognize it (this is God speaking through the prophet Jeremiah):

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<sup>1</sup> Sources for this series:

David A. Croteau and Gary E. Yates *Urban Legends of the Old Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville TN 2019)

David A. Croteau *Urban Legends of the New Testament* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2015)

Michael Svigel and John Adair *Urban Legends of Church History* (B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2020)

Alex Varughese and Mitchel Modine, *Jeremiah, A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition, New Beacon Bible Commentary* (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2010)

Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997)

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Pr 22:6

<sup>2</sup> David A. Croteau and Gary Yates, *Urban Legends of the Old Testament: 40 Common Misconceptions* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2019), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> David A. Croteau, *Urban Legends of the New Testament*, xiii.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”  
(Jeremiah 29:11, niv)

How many of you have heard that verse before? Many of us. Like last week’s verse, you might think this is pretty straightforward, but actually there is some fairly serious misappropriation of this verse that you might be surprised to find out you’ve believed, and not even realize it.

So here is...

## **The Legend.**

*The legend is that in this verse is the Lord’s promise for all believers that if you know the Lord and have enough faith, God will bless you and help you to be successful. (repeat)* So if you are starting a new venture, whether it is getting married, going to college, kicking off a new career, investing in some financial scheme, then God has plans to help you prosper. The legend is Jeremiah promises that the Lord wants to turn your negative circumstances into positive ones so that you can thrive and enjoy the life he has planned for you.<sup>4</sup> I’m not saying that God won’t be at work for the best in your life and circumstances. I’m just saying that’s not what *this* verse is about. (By the way, neither will you find promises in the Bible that God’s plans for you are always to make you rich and materially, socially, or professionally successful. But that’s a different legend). So let’s do...

## **The Fact Check.**

Let’s take a look at what the passage really means, then we will get to the point of it so we can learn from it and actually apply it as it was intended.

Bible Gateway is a Bible website that you can use to look up any Scripture in any translation, along with study resources. It’s a handy tool. Well, that website reported in 2017 that “the most-popular Bible verses on Bible Gateway divide the United States into two camps: states in which the most-popular verse (aside from John 3:16) is Jeremiah 29:11, and states in which the most-popular verse is Philippians 4:13 (“I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me,” which is another verse we will probably talk about later this summer). But people in 32 of the fifty states looked up Jeremiah 29:11 on the BibleGateway website more than any other (including our state of Washington).<sup>5</sup>

The website reports that between the years 2012 and 2015, Jeremiah 29:11 was the second-most searched Bible verse of all on its site (again, behind only John 3:16). Believe it or not, this obscure passage from the Old Testament prophets was more popular than even Philippians 4:13, Romans 8:28, and Psalm 23. There are many

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<sup>4</sup> David A. Croteau and Gary Yates, *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2017/12/do-you-live-in-a-god-has-a-plan-state-or-an-i-can-do-all-things-state/>

Christians who identify this passage as their life verse. It is frequently inscribed on jewelry or shared on Facebook or Twitter; many people even have this reference tattooed somewhere on their body. That's because, as (one author says), it sounds very much like a Christian motivation poster: "Woke up on the wrong side of the bed? Don't worry. God has a plan for your day. Facing a rough patch at work? Take a breath. Your future is bright. Money's a bit tight? Relax. God's going to prosper you." But before we retweet Jeremiah 29:11 one more time or decide to get this verse inked on our skin, we might want to take a closer look at what is easily one of the most misused passages in all of the Bible. The verse does *not* promise personal prosperity or guarantee that all the circumstances in your life will have a positive outcome (that is the heresy that the "name and claim it" prosperity gospel teaches). But, when we understand the *real* message of this text, it assures us of something even better.<sup>6</sup>

So, let's look at...

## The Passage

Let's spend some time trying to understand what God really meant when he said these words through the prophet Jeremiah; in order to best clarify the fact from fiction we'll see if we can figure out who said it, when, and why.

The first thing that is critical to realize is that this verse was spoken to...

### **Specific people in a specific situation.**

Let's start with who this was given to before we think about how it applies to us; this statement was made to specific people in a very specific situation and time. So we've always got to be very, very careful when we start reading individual verses in isolation from their larger context or taking promises meant for only a specific group of people and applying them to all believers in all ages...doing that almost always leads to misuse of the Bible.

This made me think of something I saw on TV one time. I don't know if you remember this, but man I sure do, and I cringed when I heard it. In 2013, when Ray Lewis and the Baltimore Ravens were celebrating their Super Bowl win, he practically screamed into the camera and quoted Isaiah 54:17 when he was in the winners' locker room: "No weapon formed against you shall prosper." (NKJV) Lewis declared that God had led his team to victory. I don't think God cares all that much about the outcomes of sporting events and he certainly doesn't weigh in on the wagering outcomes of those sporting events, but the problem with Lewis' use of Isaiah 54 was that it was written for the Jewish exiles in Babylon, not the Baltimore Ravens.

Well, when we read the larger context of Jeremiah 29, we see that these same Jewish exiles are the specific recipients of the promise of verse 11, that we read. The whole

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<sup>6</sup> Croteau and Yates, *ibid*

chapter of Jeremiah 29 is a report of the contents of a letter that Jeremiah wrote to the Jewish exiles. Now, these were God's people who had been taken away as prisoners by the Babylonians – just as God had been warning them for years would happen. Some of the exiles were taken away in 605 BC and more of them eight years later in 597 BC. So when we read chapter 29, we are kind of reading someone else's mail.

So here's what was going on: the Jews were in exile, and they were now living well over 700 miles from their homeland in a pagan land with pagan gods and pagan customs. The Jews were no longer able to worship God or offer sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. And for the Jews, the Temple was the place where God lived, and Temple worship was the *only* way they could enjoy God's presence. The Babylonian army was the most powerful military machine in the world, and they controlled the Middle East. From a purely human perspective, there was pretty much little or no hope for Israel's future.

So here's the point: the Lord's promise to fulfill his plans to prosper his people and give them a hope *was not addressed to individuals*. It was not written as a guarantee that God would accomplish his plan for their individual lives and help each of them to achieve their personal hopes and dreams. When you see the word "you" in verse 11, it is used *four* times in that short verse. Every time it is used, it is *plural* and not *singular*, so this verse offers a promise to all the exiles *collectively* as a group that the Lord would fulfill his promise and bring them back to their homeland when the time of the exile was over (v. 10). The Lord's plans included Israel's restoration as a people, and the most amazing thing of all was that his work of restoration and renewal for Israel would begin with the exiles in Babylon.

In Jeremiah 24, the prophet says that the people living in the land of Israel at that time were the rotten figs that needed to be thrown away because of their ongoing sin and unfaithfulness to God. But then he says that the exiles were the good figs that God would bless. They were not good figs because of their own righteousness and faithfulness to God; they were good figs simply because of God's grace – God promised to bless and restore them. The people living in the land of Israel were in for more war and more judgment. The Babylonian army was coming back; in 586 BC, they would destroy the city of Jerusalem and burn down the Temple. Many of those people who thought they were favored by God because they hadn't yet gotten taken away, they would be killed in battle or taken away as exiles themselves.

Both have to do with God's response to his people's sin and his desire to restore his people, yet again. So God's promise of blessing and a prosperous future was *only* for the exiles in Babylon.<sup>7</sup>

Is that making sense so far? Remember I showed you that meme earlier from the Princess Bride? Well, whenever I hear people misuse this verse from Jeremiah 29:11, inside I always want to say this:

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<sup>7</sup> Croteau and Yates, *ibid*, 212–213.

So Jeremiah 29:11 is all about you? Remind me again about your time in the Babylonian Exile...

Right? I think we've just shown that this was written for specific people in a specific situation. And, in fact, when the people heard this statement, they realized that it contained...

### **Bad news (and good news)**

To get the full picture of Jeremiah 29:11, we also need to see that the prophet was communicating some bad news to the exiles along with the hopeful promise for their future. In verse 10, right before this, we read that their time in Babylon was going to last for seventy long years. Jeremiah's message offered hope in a hopeless situation, but seventy years was really hard to hear. Seventy years was over a lifetime – and essentially two generations. Now, back in verses 4–7, the prophet said something really interesting to the people living in exile. He told them to build houses, plant crops, take wives, and raise families in Babylon, and that meant they were going to be there for a long time.

What the exiles had really wanted to hear was what false prophets like Hananiah were promising—that the exile would last only for a short while (Jeremiah 28:1–4). These false prophets were arguing with Jeremiah and claiming something completely different. In fact, what the false prophets were saying was closer to how we misuse this verse.

Jeremiah was going through the streets of Jerusalem wearing an animal yoke on his neck, which symbolized Judah's slavery and bondage to Babylon. Hananiah confronted Jeremiah, smashed the wooden yoke he was wearing on the ground, and then promised that within two years God would bring home Israel's King Jehoiachin and all the other exiles taken to Babylon. The people were obviously more attracted to *that* kind of positive message, but the problem was that Hananiah's message was nothing more than a figment of his imagination (23:16–17). Hananiah's message is just like today's "name it and claim it," "health and wealth," and "prosperity" messages that we hear from TV preachers. Hananiah was one of many prophets in Judah who opposed Jeremiah by promising "peace, peace, when there is no peace" (6:14; 8:11). Of course we know that Jeremiah's message that the exile would last 70 years was the *true* word from God. The first return of the exiles from Babylon would not happen until 538 BC. It's what we read about in the Old Testament book of Ezra, which our Adult Bible Class on Sunday mornings studied last spring.

Okay, do you follow all of that? So that all means that when we read Jeremiah 29:11 in its context, it is clearly not a promise of personal prosperity or an assurance that everyone who knows the Lord has the prospect of a bright and rosy future without difficulty or hardship in front of them. The people who were the recipients of the promise in 29:10–11 were already living under the harsh conditions of exile because of divine discipline for their sins, and most of them would stay in that situation for the rest of their lives.

Here's the key to properly understanding and applying this verse: The words "to prosper you" (NIV, NET), "well-being" (CSB), "welfare" (NASB, JPS), and "peace" (KJV, NKJV) are all translations of the Hebrew *shalom*. And "shalom" is a comprehensive word that describes God's desire for all people and all creation; that his Kingdom of Shalom would come, and his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10) which is what Jesus told us to pray for, right? Shalom is the word that describes God's wholeness and peace which is way, way bigger and more important than material or financial blessing or prosperity.<sup>8</sup>

God's promise in this verse was about the bigger picture of God's rule and reign of shalom for people and all of creation, not about their temporary circumstance. Which wasn't just good news, it was WAY BETTER news, news about God's longer-term plans.

So if this verse was spoken so specifically to the Jewish exiles, does it even make any difference at all for us? Well, there *is* actually an...

## Application

...for our lives; there *are* things we are intended to learn from this, and it does apply to our lives, too.

Even if we are reading someone else's mail, Jeremiah 29 *is* God's Word, and so it is for us as believers in Jesus, too. What is that word for us?

Well first, before we can get to the promise of verse 11, we have to realize that the entire chapter is a very solemn reminder that...

### **God takes sin and disobedience in the lives of his children very seriously.**

God disciplined Israel and Judah because they turned away from him and chased after false gods, and Hebrews 12:5–9 reminds us that God disciplines and corrects us as his children as well. When God sees his children engaging in sin, He knows how dangerous and deadly sin is and how much damage it can do to us and to others around us. So if we don't repent and stop sinning, we can expect that God will discipline us because he loves us too much to allow us to chase after things that are going to harm us or keep us from the abundant life that we can have in Christ. That discipline means that God may allow painful consequences for the bad choices we make, in order to turn us away from sin and back to him. Please, please understand that if you are a Christian and you are experiencing disciplinary consequences of your sin, even in God's discipline he is showing you his grace and compassion. Remember in our story that God's work of restoration would *begin* with the exiles in Babylon—the very people he had sent out of the land as punishment for their sins. God is always after our restoration.

If we reduce Jeremiah 29:11 to a proof-text for the health and wealth gospel, we cheapen its message. God's shalom is *much, much* more than financial wealth and

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<sup>8</sup> David A. Croteau and Gary Yates, *ibid*, 213–214.

even physical well-being. The Lord promised the people of Israel that he would bless them and prosper them with long life and good harvests in the Promised Land, but *their real shalom came from their relationship with him...*

### **The blessing is in the *relationship!***

It is out of our relationship to God in Christ that *every* blessing flows – big or small. But the ultimate blessing in that relationship means that we get to be included in God’s long-view vision of Shalom for people and creation. So the real riches we have in Christ are *spiritual* blessings, **not** financial ones (Ephesians 1:3, 18; 3:16). Sometimes there are, and that’s great; but that’s not God’s ultimate goal for us. For Christians today, Jeremiah 29:11 teaches us the principle that God is able and faithful to fulfill his purposes and plans for his people. God’s good purpose for the exiles was to restore them and bring them home, and he even brought down the powerful Babylonian Empire to accomplish his plans for them.

And here’s a spoiler to that story, which those who were in my Adult Bible Class learned: when we read about the exiles’ return to Jerusalem in the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah, they were still *not* restored. Their long-awaited Shalom still didn’t happen. Those events of their return from exile actually pointed toward an event in the future – when God would send his Son Jesus Christ. That’s why over 100 times<sup>9</sup> in the Gospels we hear that because of Jesus, the Kingdom of God in “near,” “has arrived,” and “is in your heart.” The promised Shalom of Jeremiah 29:11 arrived with Jesus and is now in our lives as we become God’s new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), and will one day be fully revealed in God’s newly created heaven and earth.<sup>10</sup> We *are* the new creation, and we will one day *live in* the new creation. The Kingdom of God’s Shalom is both *now* and *not yet*.

So in the meantime, God does not promise to protect us from all harm and hardship, but he does promise to fulfill his good purpose for us as believers to conform us to the image of his Son Jesus (Romans 8:28–30). Just as with the exiles in Babylon, God uses even trials and hardships for our good and to accomplish his purpose and plans in our lives.<sup>11</sup>

*That, my dear friends, and church family, is the correct understanding of Jeremiah 29:11.*

*Pray*

Closing comments about being in exile...

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.openbible.info/topics/the\\_kingdom\\_of\\_god\\_has\\_come](https://www.openbible.info/topics/the_kingdom_of_god_has_come)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.davidjeremiah.org/age-of-signs/13-verses-about-the-new-heaven-and-new-earth>

<sup>11</sup> David A. Croteau and Gary Yates, 214–215.



Pastor Jason:

*Please receive this benediction from Jeremiah 29:11-14, in the full context of the relationship we can have with God through Jesus Christ:*

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. *(Now, through a relationship with Christ!)* you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord... <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [The New International Version](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Je 29:11–14.