

---

# MESSAGE TO THE EXILED

## Life Even After A Big Mistake

*by Daniel A. Brown, PhD*

### **THE NEW COVENANT (JEREMIAH 29-33)**

Gleaning spiritual riches from any specific Old Testament passage requires that we view it in the context of the macro themes of the Old Testament, and of God's ultimate purposes for us—in other words, why He does/says *everything*. Without those interpretive bookends, our understanding (about what's going on and what it all means) will likely tumble to the floor like library books with nothing to keep them from sliding off the shelf. The jumbled pile of books is messy and confusing. Putting it another way, the picture we get of God when we pull isolated details of an Old Testament story from its surroundings, is as “untrue” of the whole picture as if we lifted a random frame from a digital video-clip and posted the single-frame shot on a website, misrepresenting it as the complete video.

Speaking of movies, don't you enjoy watching a great action-mystery flick for the second time—after you've seen who-dun nit, and you are able to spot all the clues you missed the first time around? The better the movie, the better the hidden hints and foreshadowing's, were all along. Likewise, when you are aware of an entire plan for reorganizing a business, you appreciate many of the steps being taken along the way, whereas, people who do not know the ultimate plan, either miss or misinterpret those steps.

The Old Testament communicates two basic themes of human failure: unbelief and idolatry—humanity’s propensity for not believing what God tells us; and, our inclination to worship/serve “gods that are no gods.” Over and over we read about God’s chosen people choosing NOT to trust in, or pay attention to what He says; and, time and again we watch as they exchange the true God of all Creation for carved stumps and shaped pieces of metal—and the demons behind them.

But overriding those themes of human waywardness stands a grander message: God’s unending, affectionate graciousness towards prone-to-wander people—His mercy matching, stride for stride, every errant step we take. His forgiveness covers and washes away every transaction we barter for and broker with a false god. The Old Testament contains countless reminders of this never-ending love, as in the instance when the “glory cloud” of God’s presence became physically visible during the priests’ worship (2 Chronicles 5:11-14). As they were singing, God reinforced who He is: the lyrics that He wanted to accentuate said, “God is truly good because His loving kindness is everlasting!”

After giving us the synopsis of Israel’s terrible mistakes in the wilderness, Psalm 106 rehearses the macro version of what keeps happening when God deals with people:

*“But they mingled with the nations and learned their practices, and served their idols, which became a snare to them.”*

*“ Then He gave them into the hand of the nations, and those who hated them ruled over them. Their enemies also oppressed them, and they were subdued under their power.*

*Many times He would deliver them; they, however, were rebellious in their counsel, and so sank down in their iniquity. Nevertheless He looked upon their distress when He heard their cry; and He remembered His covenant for their sake, and relented according to the greatness of His loving kindness.“*

Psalm 106: 35-36, 41-45

Several times in history, God has made covenants with humanity. They were simple, powerful and amazing. Each spelled out blessings He wanted to give them and provisions He was making on their behalf, but the covenants called for obedience and worship: “Follow Me and My counsel, worship only Me, and you will be blessed above all others in heaven and earth.” (Arrrh...the catch)

These were the very two arenas in which humans most seem to fail—again and again. That is why God established a New Covenant with us. He is determined to make provision for our failure and to take into account that we will struggle with **unbelief** and **idolatry** throughout our earthly lives. When we read the Old Testament in light of God’s covenant-making graciousness, our questions about, “*How could God do what He did?*” quickly get turned around to “*How could people do what they did?*”

Historically, the Book of Jeremiah covers the 40 years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem (and Judah as a nation) in 586 BC. Because of Judah’s stubbornness and sinfulness, their eventual captivity and enslavement is a foregone conclusion, and many portions of Jeremiah’s words from the Lord are attempting to tell people how to make the best of their coming exile: don’t imagine that it isn’t coming; pray for blessing on the city of your captivity; settle in for the long-haul; believe that God has plans for redemption and rescue; God is still our “dread champion” (Jeremiah 20:11).

Spiritually, Jeremiah announces the grave sins of God’s people, but as is always the case throughout the OT, it also foretells their eventual salvation—and provisions He makes during their exile. Amidst the stark reality of sin and the banishment/forfeiture imposed on us because of our **unbelief** and **idolatry**, Jeremiah contains some of the most vivid and hopeful pictures of God’s grace, as found in the New Covenant.

## New Covenant Instruction

- I. Inevitable Consequences.
- II. Advice in Exile.
  - A. “Multiply and do not decrease” (vs. 29:5-6).
  - B. “Seek peace in that place” (v. 29:7).
  - C. “Wait until God fulfills His good word to you” (v. 29:10).
  - D. “Believe that He has plans in place to restore you” (vs. 29:11-14 and 30:3).

### III. God's Promises to Exiles.

- A. "I will break your yoke of bondage, and you will be free to worship Me" (v. 30:8-9).
- B. "I am with you to deliver you" (v. 30:11).
- C. "You will find grace in the wilderness" (v. 31:2).
- D. "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I will draw you with kindness" (v. 31:3).
- E. "I will rebuild and gather you, and redeem you from *too-strong* enemies" (vs. 31:4; 10-11).
- F. "After I have redeemed you, your life will be full of bounty and joy" (vs. 31:12-14).
- G. "There is hope for your future" (v. 31:17).

### IV. The New Covenant (vs. 31:31-34).

- A. This is unlike previous covenants; it is unbreakable!
- B. God writes His Law on our hearts—an internal guide, not a list of rules.

*"Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. Ezekiel 36:26-27*

- C. God will enable each of us to have a personal relationship with Him.
- D. Even though we now have the advantage of an internal compass steering us away from sin, the Lord will still forgive the wrong things we do, and forget the wrong turns we take.

The picture of God that emerges from a thorough reading of Jeremiah bears little resemblance to the clichéd “God of the Old Testament,” whose short-fused wrath destroys and banishes people for their (seemingly few) sins. Though there are inevitable consequences to our sins (and others’), just as there is a cause and effect connection in most of life on this planet, the prophet Jeremiah spends far less time pronouncing judgment and foretelling the impending exile than he does advising the people on how to flourish in their coming captivity. Will life there be difficult and sorrowful? Yes. But will God grant them grace and favor in the midst of that season? Yes. Yes.

The God of mercy and grace always has a plan for our good even in our banished condition, and no matter what our offenses against Him, He always has plans for our future after the season of consequence is finished. He wants those plans to give us sustaining hope during our period of captivity, and His promises for *shalom* [peace, health, prosperity, happiness and favor] act as handholds with which we can hang onto our future state during the hard time of exile. It is as though God says, *“My words will see you through your captivity. I already have plans for afterwards.”*

In the Book of Jeremiah, as in most of the Old Testament, God is dealing with an entire nation as opposed to individual people. Consequently, their collective guilt would not be each individual’s guilt; in other words, some of the people who ended up going into exile were not necessarily the ones who forsook God to worship false gods. Yet they suffered banishment as surely as did the kings, nobles, priests and others who actively engaged in spiritual faithlessness. Some of the children who were taken captive to Babylon were not even born when Jeremiah warned Judah years before that they would be invaded if they did not repent. Is this another example of an unfair God who indiscriminately does (or allows) bad things? Or is there a lesson of mercy for us in that fact?

### **NO-FAULT POLICY**

When we set aside all hypothetical speculation about why (do both the innocent and the guilty end up with the same consequence) for a moment, we begin to see just how closely Judah’s exile matches the spiritual consequences we see in our lives individually. Not only have we gotten ourselves into some of the difficult places where we’re forced to live (consequences of our own mistakes and foolishness), but also there are also several consequent situations in our lives that resulted from other people’s bad choices. Real life is a total mixture of exile we brought upon ourselves, and places of captivity where our choices have been taken from us by what others have done.

Humans tend to end up captive and exiled in Babylon—many times over.

We may protest our innocence and eagerly blame others for our Babylonian brokenness and bondage, but when we're arguing such fine points in the Chaldean capital, we're missing the main point that demonstrates God's unending affection and grace. Regardless of why we're there, God has a plan that enables us to flourish, and to receive back our original fortune when He sets us free.

In some ways, God's plans are like no-fault insurance: regardless of who is to blame for the accident, our policy has provisions for repairing the damage and getting our car out of the shop, back onto the road.

Isn't that what we really want—a *good-as-new* car? Though it may be true that this wreck wasn't my fault, isn't it fairly likely that the next one *will* be? That is the beauty of a no-fault policy. The emphasis is not on blame, condemnation, guilt or any other finger-pointing, soul-shrinking topics of debate. If my car will be fixed *as-good-as-new*—and paid for by my no-fault policy—why would I want all the hassle of going to court to prove the other person's guilt? And if (hard to imagine) I am at fault, but his car is going to be repaired *as-good-as-new* at no cost to him, won't I be very pleased to skip the court scene, as well?

God offers to humankind a new covenant, a no-fault spiritual insurance that covers every aspect of life. And the best part of the deal—Jesus paid our lifetime premium...

## V. Inevitable Consequences.

### A. Advice in Exile.

1. "Multiply and do not decrease" (v. 29:5-6).
2. "Seek peace in that place" (v. 29:7).
3. "Wait until God fulfills His good word to you" (v. 29:10).
4. "Believe that He has plans in place to restore you" (vs. 29:11-14 and 30:3).

### B. God's Promises to Exiles.

1. "I will break your yoke of bondage, and you will be free to worship Me" (vs. 30:8-9).
  2. "I am with you to deliver you" (v. 30:11).
  3. "You will find grace in the wilderness" (v. 31:2).
  4. "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I will draw you with Kindness" (v. 31:3).
  5. "I will rebuild and gather you, and redeem you from *too-strong* enemies" (v. 31:4, 10-11).
  6. "After I have redeemed you, your life will be full of bounty and joy" (31:12-14).
  7. "There is hope for your future" (v.31:17).
- C. The New Covenant (31:31-34).
1. This is unlike previous covenants; it is unbreakable!
  2. God writes His Law on our hearts—an internal guide, not a list of rules.
    - a. "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." Ezekiel 36:26-27
  3. God will enable each of us to have a personal relationship with Him.
  4. Even though we now have the advantage of an internal compass steering us away from sin, the Lord will still forgive the wrong things we do, and forget the wrong turns we take.

Isn't it amazing all the wrong conclusions we can come to when we don't know the whole story? We learned that lesson early in life when we got caught paying back a sibling for having hit us first; not realizing the provocation that led to our

retaliation, a parent blamed us “for starting it.” Likewise, when we only hear the beginning of a story about a lost child or a frightening diagnosis, it’s easy to race ahead to a foregone conclusion, and not learn that the lost child was found safe or that the disease was healed.

Writers build entire plots around not telling the reader the whole story until the book is finished, and any good piece of fiction is ruined if the reader stops before finishing it. The whole story is very important for getting the whole point. That is exactly the case with the O.T. When we read parts of a book or limited selections from any one story, without getting the whole of it, we’re likely to miss the point—the WHY behind the various events and happenings.

Many people end up with wrong conclusions about God—and His doings in the O.T.—because they don’t read the stories’ conclusions (and beginnings). The Book of Jeremiah is an excellent example of our tendency to jump to conclusions about the goodness/fairness of what God does in a situation BEFORE coming to the end of the story.

It is true that God sent His people into exile and captivity as a consequence of their continual idolatry. Though He pleaded with them again and again over several decades, to abandon the worship practices they had picked up from the surrounding nations, they continued to say, in effect, “We’d rather experience the life these gods can give us—not the one You offer.”

God’s response was essentially to reply, “Then I will temporarily stop being your all-powerful Advocate, and I will, henceforth, allow you to have the future that would be yours without Me, a future like those of the nations whose gods you want to serve.”

When the Lord says that He was going to “give” His people “into the hands of” the King of Babylon (and their gods), it was not quite as active a process as it might seem to a reader of those words in the 21st Century. The expression doesn’t mean that He would march them thousands of miles across the planet to place them in Babylon; instead, it meant that He would withhold His protection and NOT intervene in the normal course of events created in life by the world’s brokenness and its spiritual powers.

The same sometimes happens to us and to situations in our lives. We, too, end up exiled from the immediately available provision/protection of the Lord, as specific arenas of our thoughts, behaviors and attitudes bring upon us their logical outcomes. Circumstances in which we end up living are not always God’s first

choice for us. But no matter how we end up living in a foreign land, under a foreign king, far removed from our God-intended inheritance that is NOT the end of the story!

God's got big plans for our restoration. When we are in exile living out the poor choices others and we have made, "Call to Me," says the Lord, "And I will do great and mighty things beyond your wildest thoughts!" That's what He said to His people, even before they actually went into captivity in Babylon. As the Chaldeans were just finishing preparations for their final assault against Jerusalem, as the siege-mounds were heaped level with the top of the city walls, God cried out to His people, "This is just for a short season. Do not fear, I will bring you back again, and I will restore your fortunes as they were in the beginning."

So what can we learn for our walks with the Lord in the 21st Century from this episode in Israel's history from the 6th Century B.C.? Is there, in this seeming story of judgment, a lesson of greater grace and mercy than we have seen before? Oh yes...

## VI. The Life—Giving Judgments of God.

A. "I will never forget you or cut you off completely."—God (vs. 32:35-37)

1. "Buy a piece of property in enemy-occupied (now-lost-to-you) territory."

B. Jeremiah asks God, "Why?"

1. "You're great in counsel and mighty in deed" (v. 32:19).

2. "Nothing is too difficult for You" (v. 32:17).

3. "You made a name for Yourself by delivering your people from Egypt" (v. 32:20).

4. "You gave us this land, and now You're taking it away" (vs. 32:22-23).

5. "Of course, we deserve everything we're getting—and losing" (v. 32:23).

6. “Why now, when it is too late” (v. 32:24)?

C. God’s Promises to Exiles.

1. “I will gather you from exile and bring you back to live in peace” (v. 32:37).
2. “I will be your God and you will be My people” (v. 32:38).
3. “This is for your good—and the good of your offspring—that you refuse other gods and learn not to turn away from Me” (vs. 32:39-40).
4. “With all My heart and all My soul, I will rejoice over you to do you good, and I will plant you (again) in your inheritance” (v. 32:41).
5. “Just as I faithfully gave you over to exile and its misery, so I will faithfully bring to you great and good and restoration” (vs. 32:42-44).

VII. “Great and Mighty Things” (Vs. 33:1-13).

- A. “I will bring you to health in an abundance of peace and truth” (v. 33:6).
1. “I will cleanse you from all your sin and pardon all your iniquity” (v. 33:8).
  2. “You will be a living testimony of the great work I do, by My outstretched hand, among people—restoring and forgiving them” (v. 33:9).
  3. “I will give you back your joy as in the beginning” (vs. 33:10-13).

*“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time **I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth**; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth.”*

*“In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she will be called: ‘the Lord is our righteousness.’”*  
 Jeremiah 33:14-16