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WHAT'S NEXT?

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~ Scripture: **Jeremiah 29:11-14** ~

INTRODUCTION

One of the favorite things Marcie & I look forward to every year is the Ann Arbor Art Fair.

Over the years, we have become acquainted with several artists; and we go and check out their work every year. One of those artists is a man by the name of STEPHEN SEBASTIAN [SS]. He's from North Carolina, and does the most wonderful etchings.

SS had been a favorite of Carol (my first wife) who succumbed to cancer back in 1996. That same year, my daughter Jennifer—the one who lives in Texas and just gave birth to Addisen (on Labor Day)—was to be married. Carol passed in April; Jennifer was married in August. In July, I went straight to SS's booth at the Art Fair because I wanted to purchase one of his works for Jennifer & Hank. [The whole family had always loved his etchings and we already owned two.]

I was still steeped in grief, as you can imagine. I remember sharing with him the circumstances, who I was buying this for, and what meaning it had for me and our whole family—with tears running down my face. I remember him being tremendously empathetic & understanding. He signed it specially for Jennifer.

Well, I gave the etching to Jennifer & Hank as a wedding gift—and they loved it.

Two years later, Marcie was now in my life and we had just been married a couple months. We were walking the Art Fair and ran into SS. I introduced him to Marcie—and he has become a favorite of hers as well. I asked him if he remembered me buying the painting two years prior. He certainly did remember (everything), and was jubilant that I had found love and moved on.

I remember him saying: *“That’s what is so beautiful about life: You never know what to expect . . . what’s next. . . what turn life will take. You never know how things are going to turn out. Especially when things are difficult and rough, keep an open mind and anticipate that things will change. In fact, expect it. . . and look forward to it. Otherwise, you might miss it.”*

I thought that to be a great bit of wisdom, and have found it to be true in other circumstances. Indeed, if we do give up on life, we might miss out on what God is doing or has in store for us. That's what my message is about today.

WHAT'S NEXT? We don't always know; in fact, we rarely know.

What's coming up in the NEW YEAR? Who knows!

We were opening gifts the other day (Christmas) with Karen, and she opened up a calendar someone gave her to the first month. It read: *“And now let us welcome the New Year full of things that have never been”* [Rainer Marid Rilke].

Almost surely that will include some hard things (OR, hard things to accept—like the death of a loved one) along with some good things.

Is God in the mix? Is He “working all things together for good...”? For we surely do love him, but we do wonder sometimes.

Many of us like to quote **Jeremiah 29:11-14** when things are scary or hard. Here it is:

¹¹For 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. ¹²Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

But we don't always quote this passage with a full knowledge of its context. I would like to take a few minutes to put a frame around it so that we understand precisely what God was promising to those ancient people AND what He is promising us (grandfathered in, as we all are, to all the blessings and promises of God in both the Old Testament & the New Testament).

CONTEXT

Jeremiah's ministry took place around 600 B.C. You get a hint of what's going on in the passage itself (cf. last verse above, last word **“EXILE”**).

In chapter 29, the prophet is writing a letter [dictated to his aide, Baruch] to the leaders of Judah. He's giving them an idea of what to expect.

You know, when we walk with God, we're not always sure of what to expect. As we enter the New Year, we're not sure just what's up the road. Look at last year. There was little or no talk of recession. Whatever warnings were out there were “talked down” by forecasters not wanting to disturb the sense of peace & prosperity we were still hanging onto. . .or else, we just weren't listening. So, we don't always know *what's next!*

Verse 1 sets the stage: *“This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.”*

Everybody had been carried away into captivity. God owns up to it. He's the One who caused them to be carried away – cf. **v. 7**:

“Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.”

Now there were false prophets among them who were telling them their captivity would be short (cf. vv. 8-9). **Don't** listen to them, he warns. **Don't** pay any attention to their deceptions. AND, **Don't** think of coming back anytime soon. Make the best of it; you're going to be there awhile.

That's why Jeremiah is writing—to help the people reconcile themselves to their captivity. He tells them to settle in for awhile. Read **vv. 5-6**. Build-Plant-Marry-Raise families.

“Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.”

Don't foster hopes of a speedy return. It'll come—but not for 70 years. Read **v. 10f**:

“This is what the LORD says: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.....I know the plans I have for you (i.e.: I know what I'm doing).’”

But not now. So, don't seek quick relief. Don't seek a quick end to suffering. Don't look with longing to something else, somewhere else. Slow down! See what's in this country.

The purpose of suffering may not just be to have it end. [A great line from PAT DERSEY.]

God is interested in our CHARACTER more than our COMFORT.

ILLUSTRATION

Marcie & I used to attend the big Praise Gatherings in Indianapolis. Many of you have too. One of our favorite groups was a husband-wife duo, Reggie & Ladye Love Smith [LL]. They do the best rendition of *You Raise Me Up* (as good a Gospel song as it is a love song).

We tend to think professional Gospel singers (et.al.) lead a charmed life. I read an article¹ about a 3-year period of grief and struggle for them over the loss of her mother and their difficulties in having a child. “*I could still stand onstage and sing about God’s love and really believe what I was singing was true...I just thought it was true for other people, not me.*” LL said. For a long while she felt raw and vulnerable, and found no solace in prayer.

Then God spoke to her through **James 1:12** — “*Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life God has promised to those who love Him.*”

This verse seems to be saying that hard things will come, but God will bring us through. And in the end God will redeem the pain for us and use it to our good.

Listen to LL’s testimony: “*I went all the way out to the edge of my faith, and God let me go there. I had to find my own way back and choose Him all over again. When I was finally able to reach out, He was waiting for me—not to scold me but to comfort me. He was saying, ‘I know this hurts, I know you don’t understand, but there are great things ahead you can’t see now —not because of everything that has happened, but in spite of it.’*”

They eventually came to terms with their infertility, and have since adopted a beautiful 2 year old boy.

It didn’t happen the way Reggie & LL thought it would or should. And yet what happened next was OK (i.e.: more than OK). It always is when you realize God’s plan is being worked out. . . and that God is in control.

APPLICATION

“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.”

Can you trust that this morning?

If you do, you have to realize that you don’t know exactly how it will all come about. That’s hard for people who like to plan. . .who like to have everything fit neatly into place.

- We don’t always know what’s going to happen next.
- And what happens next isn’t always “good” or “what we expect”.

It wasn’t for LL & Reggie. It wasn’t for the people of Judah. What they heard from the prophet was not what they expected (or wanted) to hear.

And then when things happen that seem “bad”, “wrong”, even “evil”, we forget that God can work those things in to His overall plan (as a baker works flour into dough).

~ ILLUSTRATION: Chinese Story ~

Even that which seems “evil” is designed for good (cf. Romans 8:28). God is working toward an expected end, which He will get us to in due time. We don’t always know WHEN. But what you do know is there’s a PLAN (a game plan).

Those people in Judah—in the midst of captivity—not sure of what was going to happen next, needed to know this. And that’s why Jeremiah writes this wonderful letter to them—beautifully summarized by **Matthew Henry**, the commentator:

¹ An article entitled “*Heart of the Matter*” by Tori Taff, excerpted from **Homecoming Magazine**, April 14th, 2007

“He (God) will give them, not the expectations of their fears, nor the expectations of their fancies, but the expectations of their faith—the end of which He has promised and which will turn out best for them.”

| For whatever you are facing at this time, that is the best news I could give you this morning!

| This is a particularly poignant message to us (in this church family) this season. It seems like we have been besieged this past month (e.g.: illnesses, surgeries, deaths, job losses, wild & crazy things). I’ve found myself saying, “What’s going on here?”

| God is still in control—even when everything seems out of control.

What are you praying / longing for? Keep on seeking with vigor & fervency, because:

v. 12 — When “*you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will **listen** to you.*”

v. 13 — “*You will seek me and **find me** when you seek me with all your heart.*”

He may not answer your prayers in exactly the way you think He ought to.

But He has promised that He will LISTEN to you (v. 12). . .and that you will FIND HIM (v. 13).

And another great promise in **Jeremiah 33:3**—“*Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.*” A great promise for the New Year!

SO ... WHAT’S NEXT FOR OUR COUNTRY?

We’ve heard all the rhetoric about change. . .bail-outs. . .re-organizing whole corporations to create more jobs. . .stimulating the economy. Fact is, this may be one of those instances in which deliverance might not be immediate (just as it wasn’t for the people of Judah). Things may get worse before they get better. That’s not what you wanted to hear this morning.

I’m no prognosticator, but that could lead to some good things. How about a world with less greed. . .a world that is kinder & gentler. . .more open to and dependent on God?

Maybe we have a shot at the world understanding that real prosperity doesn’t consist of “accumulation of wealth (or things)” → get some more balance in our economic structures so that poor people have some of the same possibilities that the wealthier enjoy.

Maybe we can grasp the reality that real change has to come from *within* (in attitude, outlook, worldview) not from *without* (in the political, economic structures). At least it starts there. If greed could somehow be abated, wouldn’t that make a huge difference in how things go?

I believe that God has “plans for prosperity, not for harm or destruction” for America and other nations. And now that we’re not as comfortable as we once were, maybe God can get some work done toward those ends.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR OUR CHURCH?

The other day I ran across this passage in **Haggai**. Understand that Haggai is writing to the same people Jeremiah was—only on the other end of the 70 years. They are starting to matriculate back to their homeland (Jerusalem), and their house of worship—the TEMPLE—is in a shambles. After getting the people to look around and take it all in, Haggai writes in **2:7** —

“I will fill this house with glory,” says the LORD Almighty.

And He did. . .and will. I already see it happening—HERE. I see it in your faces. . .I sense it in the aliveness of our worship. . .I watch it in the lives of so many new people jumping on board. Our ministries are making a huge difference in the lives of lots of men & women, youth and children. Our devotion to the study and knowledge of God’s Word is on the increase, our outreach to the community and to the world is on the increase.

What could it all lead to? A 3rd worship service? More small groups discipling and caring for more people? People hearing and responding to the call of God on their lives and moving to the next level—be it coming to

faith, assuming a leadership position, initiating a new ministry.

But Haggai goes on: ⁸“*The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty.* ⁹*The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty.*”

God wanted the temple to be rebuilt. He had the gold & silver to do it, but He needed willing hands. God has chosen to do His work through people. He provides the resources, but willing hands must use those resources and do the work. What’s next for us as a church will depend largely upon how available we are for God’s work in the world. No one person (or few persons) can do it all. As we put our money together + our energy + our time + our talent—and bathe it in a lot of prayer—we can take the work of God in this place to the next level.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR YOU / YOUR FAMILY?

God is always getting us ready for what’s next. Usually we don’t know what that is. Often it’s a lot different than we thought it’d be. Usually we are startled when it begins to unfold.

We are concerned for many things this morning:

- What will happen in our marriage? With our children?
- What will happen in a business venture?
- What will happen in our health or the health of a loved one?
- What will happen in our employment situation?

As you are trying to figure out “what’s next”, I hope you will quote Jeremiah 29—with the proper understanding. As for the people of Judah:

- Things may not come out exactly as you expected;
- Things may get worse—for a time;
- Things may take longer than you thought they would.

EXAMPLES: Grief. Healing. Finding a resolution (to a problem or family matter).
Re-locating to Dexter took a lot longer than we expected! 😊

Nevertheless:

- God will bring you through!
- God does have a plan. . .and it’s a good plan!
- God is faithful. . .God is in control!
- In the end, hope will never-ever disappoint!