

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**October 29 & 30, 2011**  
**John Crosby**  
**Sharing Hope**  
**Jeremiah 29:11**

Sunday we had a meeting in the chapel about the denomination, and at one point one of my friends said, "Can you break this all down for me? You know, put it in just a couple bulleted points?" I said, "That is a problem because Presbyterian theology is just not very bumper sticker friendly. You can't even fit the word *Presbyterian* on a bumper sticker." My friend actually felt like I was trying to duck him. Maybe it was just that I wasn't being clear, but all week I have been thinking about bumper sticker theology and how hard it is to convey huge truths on a bumper sticker. We try.

You know, sometimes you see bumper stickers, and they are the standards, the oldies but goodies.

- Warning: in case of rapture, this car will be unmanned.

Or,

- If it ain't King James, it ain't the Bible.
- Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.

Do you really want to pull in next to these people at the grocery store? We are Americans, right? There are even whole companies who do Christian bumper stickers. Here are just a few examples that you can put on the back of your car, like it or not. Some of them are theological.

This one I liked:

- Try Jesus. If you don't like Him, Satan will take you back.

The other side is always represented theologically as well.

- When religion ruled the world, they called it the Dark Ages.

Some bumper stickers are politically correct.

- Heck* is for people who don't believe in *gosh*.

And some, even though they are called bumper sticker theology, some are just political, right? Somebody has a point of view there. Or the other side of it is that some of them are targeted at a very specific audience.

You go down the road and you see this:

- The Presbyterian Church U.S.A. where the well-heeled come to be *well healed*.

Sometimes you see a sign or a bumper sticker and you have no clue. This next one, really? I looked up Romans 9:13 because I was going, "What did I miss here?"

- Jacob has our love. Esau hath I hated. God hates frogs.

Help me! Or not.

Some bumper stickers are just wisdom distilled down like this next one:

- Honk if you love Jesus. Text while driving if you'd like to meet Him.

It is a challenge trying to put huge truths into a sound bite. When I started to hang around with Christians after college, I noticed that they would memorize tiny verses of the Bible that would become hugely meaningful to them. These verses would be a way of having sound bites about God -- which I thought was a fabulous idea. I've tried the same thing, but sometimes the sound bite can actually become confusing. It is a bumper sticker, but does it really help? For instance, we could put this next verse on bumper sticker. It would fit. It would be very familiar. Many people have loved this promise. It comes from Jeremiah 29.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

But I wonder, as I listen to it, if it is not too big to fit on a bumper sticker. The reason I wonder if it is not too big is because I'm not too sure how much this reflects the reality of my life. Do you ever wonder why your life isn't turning out the way that you planned, the way that you thought God has promised? Some of you would say, "I thought I was supposed to be married by now." "I was supposed to get a promotion by now." "I planned to be retired." "This start-up idea was supposed to work so I wouldn't lose my home." "We planned to have children." "I was supposed to have achieved this dream." Or, "Yeah, I wasn't supposed to go bankrupt." "I didn't plan to lose my job." "I wasn't supposed to get divorced." "Getting cancer was not part of the plan." What do you do when life does not turn out to bless the way that you think life is supposed to be planned? It's a key learning for me this week. Everybody has plans. Everybody! We all plan, but in this verse, God does not say, "For I know the plans *you* have for you." Right?

A friend of mine points out that in the Bible, God is always interrupting somebody else's plans. Adam didn't plan on getting created. Noah didn't plan on building an arc. Abraham didn't plan on having a kid in his nineties. Esther didn't plan on trying to stop the genocide. Moses did not plan on defying Pharaoh. Mary did not plan on getting pregnant. There is not a single story in the Bible that starts with, "Then a human being had a great plan...." "I know the plans...." because in the Bible and, I think, in real life, it is not about my plans or your plans, but this bumper sticker passage has a promise. God says, "I know the plans I have for you...to prosper you...to give you hope...." How can that be? Back then, did it really work for them? Or now? You have hope or you are prospering. You see the plan of God for you.

When your plans go into the toilet, when it doesn't turn out that way God told you it would, what happens next? Then I think you have to look past the bumper sticker, past the one verse. So I'd ask you all to reach forward and pull out the Bibles that are in the pews in front of you and turn with me to Jeremiah 29, and I would ask you to get out a pen or a pencil. Everybody get a pen or a pencil because we would like to mark this up for the next person who reads it. Jeremiah 29. If you are in my classes, page 1,176, Jeremiah 29. The bumper sticker verse that we just read is verse 11, so if it is not already underlined in your Bible, I would like you to underline Jeremiah 29:11. Are we close to being there? And I would like you to hold it open because I want to do some things with it. Verse 11 says,

<sup>11</sup> 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.

But it is important to see that it didn't happen that way. I know it sounds odd, but if you read the whole passage, it turned out very differently from what people read to what they, the people who read this passage, experienced. So I think it is imperative that we understand that while the text, the sound bite, is important, much more important is the context, the setting. If you could only understand what God is really saying to you, if you really understand what is going on around it. So let's look at what Jeremiah is saying because context is most important in the Bible when prophecy, that is, predictions about the future, are coming into play. Jeremiah 29 starts on page 1,176, with verse 1. This verse is part of a letter.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

Remember? Super-quick history. Back then, you and your gods were in it together. If you were doing well, your gods were strong. If you were doing badly, your gods were poor. For a long time the Israelites had bad gods. They were slaves in Egypt. Then all of a sudden, they are out, rescued, and their God gets stronger. Not gods, God. They only had one God. God gets stronger. Saul, the first King, no big deal, but then comes King David. He builds an empire between these two mighty empires and says, "Just one God here." His son Solomon turns that kingdom into a little empire of its own, the height of power, even though Solomon is going, "This is one God, and all you other gods can stay in the background and be with us." But they prospered, and their God got a good name. As soon as Solomon dies, there is a civil war. The kingdom is split apart. They become very weak, and soon after that, the neighbor starts picking them off. The Babylonians, in this case, have come in, conquered them, crushed them and carried them into exile.

This is the letter Jeremiah sends from Jerusalem to those who have been carried off to Babylon. Okay, we'll go to verse 4. If you want to be a person who has a sense of hope in the future when you are carried off into exile, when your God has seemingly dropped the ball and the plans that you had are gone, begin with verse 4. God says,

<sup>4</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

It says, "*God says.*" God speaks to people and we need to listen especially when things go bad. "*The Lord Almighty says to those I carried into exile.*" Earlier it says that Nebuchadnezzar carried them, but God says, "*I carried you. I picked you up like a baby so you wouldn't get killed, and I went with you. I went with you into exile.*" The first thing that people who believe that there is a God and that bad things happen have to remember in verse 4 is that God is not surprised by what is happening to us. God saw it coming. God did not leave us. God wants to carry us and love us each step of the way. So if it is not already underlined in your Bible, underline those I carried into exile so the next person will see you are not alone. Will you do that?

The second way that I think you get hope when your plans go kibosh is in verses 5 and 6. God says to the people, in this new land, in Babylon,

<sup>5</sup> Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. <sup>6</sup> 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.

Underline settle down. God wants them to find a way to live quiet, godly lives in the middle of a foreign country. When their plans were wrecked, God had other plans for them. They are not called to be Moses. They are not called to lead the revolution. The only people who are called to do that are the people who are called to do that. Most of us are called to find quiet, godly lives where we are. If this were a Hallmark card, it would say, "Bloom where you are planted." But it is not a Hallmark card. It is God speaking and so it says more than that. It is a promise that you can find blessing in the here and the now. You can be blessed by God in Babylon, and you don't have to worry about the myths of *if only*. *If only* I had been a good person, this would not have happened. *If only* I had said yes to him, this would not have happened. If only.... If only.... If only.... And so we live our lives on *if only*. We don't experience blessings because *if only* is where we want to live, not here.

I think Tim Keller says that there are two conflicting actions that rob people in exile, that is, people whose plans are not working out. Two conflicting actions rob the faithful of hope, of God's presence, when we live in exile and, frankly, in some ways, aren't we all in exile? People who are following God are not in the promised land. We have to settle for Edina. Not bad but not heaven. We are in Babylon. We are in exile. It doesn't feel like it because we have gotten so used to it. Keller says, "That's dangerous!" Some of you will get so used to living in Edina that you will forget that you are living in Babylon. You will assimilate so much into your culture that you will forget that your God is not their gods. They have different gods. You will look so much like your neighbors that nobody will be able to tell the difference including you. Is that you? Have you assimilated so well that the only time you really work on the God thing is in here. You lose hope? When things don't go according to plan, God isn't there.

The other group that loses hope are the ones who stay in here all the time. They isolate themselves from the hope. All of your friends go to church. All of your friends are in Bible studies. All of your friends pray for each other. I love having believing friends, but when we isolate ourselves, when we don't settle among the people that God has put us in the middle of, when we don't have our kids go to their schools or date them or marry them or whatever them, if we are not involved in the culture that God has put us in and we isolate ourselves, then we really become legalistic. We say, "Oh, no wonder this is a terrible place" because we are not doing anything about it. Can I just ask you, which track do you fall into? Are you too assimilated into this culture or are you too isolated from it? Are you church-time Mary or are you Saturday-night Sam? Which one are you?

The third thing I would like you to underline is in verse 8. You want hope. You think you are in exile, but don't be deceived. Jeremiah says there are going to be a lot of people speaking in the name of God, speaking in the name of culture, telling you things that you want to hear. I think it is so fascinating. It says here,

<sup>8</sup> Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have."<sup>9</sup> They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the LORD.

We want to hear the good stuff. We want to hear that it is going to be good in just a minute. Don't be deceived. God is saying to His people, "I don't want you to assimilate into the culture where you find yourself. There is value there, idolatry there, lifestyle there. I don't want you to live exactly the way they live. I want you to walk with me. Don't get caught up with them because that is success or that is the easiest, but don't isolate away from them either. I want you to become salt and light among them but not the same as them. Don't be deceived."

The fourth sign of hope or the fourth way to get hope is in verse 10. Look at verse 10.

<sup>10</sup> This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup> 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."

Underline these words, when seventy years are completed. It is impossible to understand Biblical hope if you don't understand that it does not work on a daytime planner. It does not work on our clocks. It is God's clock. This is a hard lesson for me. I want God to show up and do it now. God seems insistent on doing it at another time. The clock is not mine. God's idea of success is not mine. Some of you are living very faithful lives that do not look very successful. I am saying to you, "The clock is still ticking." Only when 70 years are up will you leave exile. Do you know what that really means? None of you are going to get there. You are all going to die in exile. All of us die in Babylon. We only see the Holy City from a far place, and that is why the idea of the hope of God is nonsense. If you don't believe that there is life after death, you probably need to find a different church. It makes no sense here if you have hope for this world alone. Only when 70 years are up will it make sense. So, all good above-the-neck kind of theology for us to have. Hope when our plans are not there. God is not surprised. God wants us to be engaged in our culture. God says, "My time is not your time. Trust Me. I will show up." But how do our hearts change? May I ask you to underline one more thing? Verse 7. In verse 7, it says,

<sup>7</sup> Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Underline that. The word Jeremiah uses there, we are to pray for the success of the city, and the word he uses is *shalom*, a famous Jewish word, right? *Shalom*. What do you think it means? Peace. But it really goes far past that. It means peace of mind. Let fire between enemies cease. It means flourish. Universal life and wholeness and delight. Do you want a sense of hope? Do you want to see the blessing of God even if you are in Babylon? Then bless Babylon. It is very important. Jeremiah is not a health-and-wealth kind of guy. He is not saying, "If you bless them, then you will get money in your account." He is saying, "If you give them *shalom*, if you give them the peace of God, then wholeness will come to the city and you will experience that wholeness." God is saying, "I want you to engage in work and business, in culture and in the arts, in education. I want you to be involved in the care for the poor and in technology so that how you live with your neighbor, how you handle your finances, will help Babylon flourish the way God intended the city to flourish. That is your role being in exile."

That is why *CPC Life* is so important, by the way. It is just story after story after story of people whose lives are not turning out the way that they had planned, and then God shows up, and

they are blessed. Then after they are blessed, they have a chance to bless somebody else, and *shalom* comes to the plan. John Ortberg says,

Anytime somebody is kind or helpful to a stressed-out young mom, a little *shalom* breaks out. When you're at the office and you take a moment to really care for a customer, or when you go directly to a coworker to work out a problem rather than gossiping, or when you ask God to help you work with a better attitude for His glory, then a little *shalom* is breaking out in your office. Jesus is there. When somebody is patient with a clerk, when somebody volunteers to give time or resources to an overworked classroom teacher, when somebody prays with a wounded veteran or senior citizen, when you in Jesus' Name seek to enhance the work of the Boy Scouts, when in Jesus' Name through the Opera Guild, you help this be a city with greater music and beauty available to lift up and inspire people's hearts, when you through a book club help people to search for knowledge and understanding that can set them on a path to truth, then, see, we're becoming a Jeremiah 29 church.

You are spreading *shalom*. You are blessing the city, and *shalom* starts to break out in the Twin Cities. It is not for God to get me out of exile. *If only* this would happen. Maybe what I should do is seek God *in* my exile because God is up to something here. You see, it was only in exile when something that could never happen happened to Israel. If Israel had become the superpower, they would have said, "God is good and so are we." It was only when they went into exile, only when everything else turned off that they turned to God. Only then would they be able to bless others instead of blessing themselves. I don't know what your experience is like, if your plans are not working out, if you are in exile, but I do know that if you want hope, then a core part of it is becoming the kind of person who seeks the peace of Babylon, who seeks to bless this city and do it in very practical, Biblical, non-religious ways.

Rich talked about this last week. We had a small chance for just three days to live differently, to eat differently than we usually eat so that other children would be able to eat at all. Live differently so that they could live. Hands up, how many of you tried it for at least one meal? How many of you missed even just one meal? Raise your hand. This is just a start. We are going to do this for several years, I think. I am trying to root it in our DNA. Maybe we will get a little better at it. I did it for three days. Hated it. It stunk. Had a headache. I was snappy. My wife was worse. She is not at this service. But that was just an experience. If we are to seek the help of Babylon, it has to be part of living differently from the people in Babylon. May I give you a little hint of what that means? That means that if 10 percent of your money came to the church, pray to God that it would, if 10 percent of your money came to the church, that would be a good thing but that leaves 90 percent going to Babylon. Doesn't it seem like God would be interested in what happens with 90 percent of your money? I think so. I would like to show you a video about two minutes long that gives us an idea of how God could use this community to bless this world.

*(video begins)*

You know it is strange but the more stuff we get, the more entitled we feel. We become preoccupied, busy, driven people where there is no sense of gratitude and our generosity disappears, and we are reduced to being just consumers. We live in this system where ruthlessness targets us, manipulates us, and before we know it, enslaves us. And meanwhile half of the world's population lives on less than \$2 a day, and no matter how

gifted, intelligent, or hard-working they are, there is no escape. They don't have access to jobs, to resources, to justice, or even to clean water. They have little education and nobody they know who can help.

Now what if an answer to our problem could also be an answer to theirs? What if our spending could actually be used to fix problems instead of creating them? What if the money we spend could save a life? With fair trade, small changes to our spending habits here can transform whole communities there. We get things we need like coffee, olive oil, chocolate, soap, bags, t-shirts, gifts, all made by the poor who now earn a living wage, made sustainably and made without slavery or child labor. What they get are jobs that bring them dignified work, that break cycles of dependency and the freedom from abuse?

Churches all over America are partnering with Trade As One to mobilize their people, to buy fair trade and be good news to the poor. Their purchases have brought dignity and stability and hope to some of the darkest places in the world. And, think about this: if every person who attended church in this country made just one fair trade purchase, one million families would be lifted out of poverty for one whole year. Would you join us? Your spending can change lives.

*(video ends)*

*John Crosby:* So to the people who live in exile, whose plans have not worked out, who live in Babylon, God says, "Seek the prosperity of this city that you are in. Bless the world." I've asked Nathan George who is the president of Trade As One, who put together that little fair that you passed on the way in, to come and share with you in just four or five minutes how God has been using Trade As One to bring hope to hopeless parts of the world. Welcome!

*Nathan George:* Thank you. It is great to be here. I am glad to be here when it is not 6-feet deep in snow. That will be tomorrow though. So you might recognize the voice from the video. That was me. My wife and I moved over here from the UK five years ago with our three boys and settled down in California to start Trade As One. The theme of what you are preaching on this weekend, John, is just so deeply resonant with why Catherine and I started the business.

I grew up as a missionary kid. I had a pretty weird upbringing, actually. At the age of 12, you know, growing up in Iran, daily stoned by mullahs for preaching the Gospel, my dad preaching the Gospel at the time. I had grown up with this sense that to really be holy, you either had to wear a robe like you are wearing today or be out in the mission field doing something special for God, but then I went into business. I just settled down. I married and I had kids. I had a mortgage and I just looked like I had a normal life.

But I was always haunted by this notion that I should have gone to seminary, a place you have to go to be paid to be a Christian. So I had a very normal life, but how does my life get missional in what I'm doing in my job? That is the starting of these thoughts, really, that started Trade As One. It came down to this secular-sacred divide, that what we did for God is good and that's holy, and is 10 percent (a study shows it's about 3 percent). But maybe once or twice in my life I heard a sermon on the other 97 percent and that's not a mission issue. Isn't it a discipleship issue, a kingdom issue? That really struck me. What am I doing with those other resources? How am I preaching the Gospel with that, and so with my business background, my wife and I

visited about 25 of these businesses on the front lines of rescuing women from human trafficking, people with HIV/AIDS, the poorest of the poor. We were totally blown away with the difference that a dignified job makes for the poorest of the poor. We are very excited and very involved in the fair trade movement.

Just to give you an idea, this kind of thing is the sort of organization we went to visit. This is a rug made in Nairobi made by a woman with HIV/AIDS. The individual names are on each one of the rugs. We have three of these rugs in our house. There is one by my bedside so the first thing in the morning my feet hit this rug and I am sacramentally connected with Derusha in Nairobi. I don't know if Derusha is still alive, but it is a way for me to take my every day, settling down, everyday kind of lifestyle, and preach good news to the poor and freedom to the captives.

These cards are made by orphans from the genocide in Rwanda. They make the paper themselves, turn it into cards and they have dignified jobs in that way. These are examples of how we took this idea of "I'm not called to be a missionary. I'm called to be a business person, and I'm called to live in the West, but how can my life reflect God's message of good news to the poor?"

*John Crosby:* Nathan is going to be out in the great room. We would love to have you talk with him. He is also going to talk this evening at The Table because this is one way we believe that God's people can offer hope to others. Is life turning out differently than you had planned? You look at the difference, "You know the plans I have for you...." What happened in those plans when it is hard and you get hit and suffer? Welcome to Babylon. Join the other exiles. Maybe God is saying, "I want you to live depending on Me. I want you to live in such a way that the other Babylonians, Edinans, look at you at say, 'You know, it is a funny thing about those Israelites, those Christians. I don't believe in their God. I don't belong to that religion. I don't believe their ideas, but I am sure glad that those Presbyterians are here in Babylon with us. Our city would be a poorer, darker place if their God were not here.'"

You and I live in exile. Our own little plans get crunched and then we get to decide if we would become part of God's plan here in this room. That is when it makes sense. "I know the plans I have for you...to give you hope and a future." They are not your plans. They are probably not easy or pain-free plans. They are just Jesus-plans, and they are the hope of the world. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, I've been reminded again this morning that You are here. You know the hopes and the disappointments of everybody in this room who feels like they are in exile. For some it is money. Or it might be a relationship. It might be a divorce. For some it is being alone. Plans may have failed. They might feel rejected. Some feel ashamed. Even for those for whom it is working out, there is the sense that it is very fragile. So as brothers and sisters, as a family, we acknowledge that our plans are not the ultimate plans. We only see a little bit. Sometimes we cling so hard that when our dreams die, God, we feel like we are going to die. God, would You just speak again to my heart. "I know the plans I have for you...." Not our plans, not easy plans, but better plans, plans that will bless others today. Keep us moving toward that hope here and now. Amen.

Much of this sermon was made better by the work of Warren Wiersbe, Scott Dudley, First Presbyterian, Bellevue, WA, John Ortberg of Menlo Park Presbyterian, Menlo Park, CA, and Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian, NYC. If I have failed to credit others verbally, it is in the nature of oral presentation. Soli Deo Gloria