



THE BIBLE TOP

5

**W**hat do the five most searched, highlighted and shared Bible verses really mean? Are they sometimes misunderstood? These five famous Bible verses may not mean what many people think they mean, but like all of God's Word, what they truly tell us is so much more!

## THE BIBLE TOP 5 • Jeremiah 29:10–14 • Jennifer Holz • August 9, 2020

Today we finish our sermon series on **The Bible Top 5**. We've been exploring the Scriptures most searched for, clicked on and shared widely. We've looked at the misunderstandings that can arise from searching for a single verse—and how easily we can turn a Scripture to fit our needs rather than let the Scripture speak for itself. It's easy to do. We all find ourselves daily in places of difficulty, wrestling with deep challenges that we can't make sense of. In searching for a bit of relief, or peace ... we go to the Word of God for comfort and strength. And that is the right impulse, friends. But when we snatch a verse here or there, pulling it out of its larger context, we risk missing its full meaning. But as Pastor Tim has led us through the past four weeks, we are discovering that the true meaning of these verses far surpasses the misunderstanding. There is good news in this series.

Today we come to the No. 1 most-searched verse, and it's likely not a surprise. Even if you've never read the Bible, it's possible that you've seen this verse posted, or on a bumper sticker, or stuck on a refrigerator. It's Jeremiah 29:11: "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." This is a great verse. I can see why we love it: prosperity, hope, planning for the future. Sounds like God wants me to be rich, to have everything I need for the future. Sounds like He's got a plan right in line with how I am planning for my future. Right? Maybe. Let's read a little more around that verse. Listen closely for key words and phrases that root this verse in a slightly different place than we might be aware. Open your Bibles to Jeremiah 29. And as you do, let's open our hearts in prayer. 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. 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. Then 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, "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" (Jeremiah 29:10–14).

### Making Plans

It's good to have a plan. It seems like for the past few months, we have all been deeply in touch with the process of making plans or waiting on plans. Some of you have been pouring over plans to reopen your businesses, waiting for plans for schools and colleges, attempting to make plans each day that keep you sane and healthy. We carry around with us health plans, work plans, reopening plans, school plans, financial plans ... it's helpful to have a plan. Plans provide an anchor. And living in a time when we have no idea what the end point looks like, having a plan helps us stay grounded each day. Every evening, as a family, we take a moment to answer the question, what's the plan for tomorrow? We have a teenager now who gets a bit more freedom in setting his own plan for the day. I say to him each morning: "text me your plan. If it

changes, let me know." While it's good to have a plan, we are also aware that plans can change. We are very aware in this time that the plan we have today could change drastically tomorrow. Whenever our Governor gets up to speak, we have come to expect plans are going to change.

We come to Jeremiah 29:11, and we read that God has a plan for us. That sounds great. And we read that God has good plans for us that will prosper us and help us have hope and not bring harm. That is wonderful news. This is a great verse. If I were to pick a verse out to put on my refrigerator or yours—this would be an admirable choice! It helps me to know that God has a plan for me. We don't have this particular verse on our fridge, but we have something like it ... it's just a bit shorter and easier to remember: "STOP FREAKING OUT." That's the Holz translation of this Jeremiah 29:11. We make plans so we don't freak out. Plans help us move from chaos to clarity. From confusion to hope. So let me ask you this, how have your plans gone this summer? How are your plans going for the fall? Our kiddos were supposed to start school tomorrow. Now it's next week. I guess we'll see.

When God speaks through Jeremiah and tells His people that He has a plan for them, a good plan, what does that mean? Are God's plan like our plans? Does He want the same things for me that I want? When I envision a prosperous and hopeful future for myself, does God see the same things that I see? Fortunately, Jeremiah 29:11 is rooted in a story and a context that helps us understand what is going on here. There are four quick things I think you should know about this chapter before you fall in love with this verse.

### Exile

First, the people of Israel are in exile. When Jeremiah writes these words from the Lord, the people of Israel are in captivity. They are a conquered people. They have been forced from their homes to live in Babylon. They are not free to live their lives how they would like. They are in unfamiliar territory with unfamiliar gods. They are not happy about their circumstances. They would like to go home. If we simply read just the sentence before verse 11, we hear that the Lord's good plan for them is that they won't be going home—not for a long time. The key words in this verse? 70 years. That's a long time. That's a lifetime. The Lord's good plan is not quite in alignment with what they would like the plan to be. God's answer here is no. Sometimes God says no. Jeremiah 29:11 is the presentation of a different plan than theirs. It is a "no" to their plan and an invitation to listen to God's. So, I'm just checking, do you still want this verse on your fridge?

Second, it seems that exile was not an afterthought, but part of God's good plan for them. Wait ... what? If we read beyond verse 11 ... we come across something quite uncomfortable. Another key phrase: "I carried you into exile" (verse 14). The people of God know the Exodus story—of God carrying them out of slavery and bondage and into freedom. But this is new. God has carried them into Babylon, into captivity? His good plan includes an exile moment? Again, I'm just checking. Do

you want to hear the plan of God for your life? It might not be what you want. Before you post this verse on your Facebook page, know that sometimes God's plans for us might involve a "timeout" corner. And the timeout corner might be a place where God says—get comfortable. Unpack your bags. Settle in. You are going to be here for a while. So, if God has a timeout in mind for you, you're good, right? Just making sure.

Third, let's talk about that word "prosper." I do not think that word means what you think it means. God's plan is to prosper you. Yes. But the word used here is the Hebrew word "Shalom." It is sometimes translated prosperity. But it is also translated peace, well-being, welfare, health, safety, right relationship. It's a word rooted in relationship, not stuff. Our Western culture has nurtured us to think of prosperity as individual happiness of my own terms, with the life I want, with the things I want and fully independent of anyone else. But shalom is not about my own prosperity in the sense of accumulation of wealth and health. Rather it means a deep sense of wholeness when one is rightly related to God and neighbor.

So, we'll have to move over our images of Tahiti, the mountain chalet, the secluded beach house, and any picture of paradise that we are reaching for which allows us to "exit" the world. And we will need to replace it with a relationship with the God of the universe and with the people in our families and the guy next door. This word cuts off any escape route we might dream of to get away from it all, and calls us to "bloom" right where we are planted. You know, like, you are going to need to learn to enjoy your next-door neighbor for about the next 70 years. That, my friend, is a little more in line with shalom. All that to say, our idea of "prosperity" and God's idea of "prosperity" are likely quite different. Again—just checking. Do you still want to put this bumper sticker on your car, which might now be a Ford Pinto instead of your dream car.

And finally, perhaps, if we read this whole passage, we learn that this verse is actually not about you. And it's not about me. I know, shocker. Scripture is first and foremost about God and God's story. This whole passage is mostly about God, not us. This is a passage more about the richness of being attached to the God of Israel than about getting the things we want to make our lives more comfortable. I'm so sorry that I might be wrecking this perfectly beautiful verse for you. But I promise by the end of this sermon, you might still want it as your life verse—perhaps just not for the reasons you initially thought.

So, if Jeremiah 29:11 isn't about getting what I want, then what is it about? Jeremiah 29:11 in context is about trusting God's design for our lives—especially when we are in a place we didn't plan to be and don't want to be. It's about acknowledging our need for God and being vulnerable and responsive to Him always. And the other piece that is really difficult to get at is that this passage is not about the happiness and prosperity of the individual. We are cultivated to be fiercely independent in our western ways rather than dependent on anyone or anything. But this passage has a clear call to dependence on God in the context of community as the people of God. The "you" here is plural, not singular. I know that plans I have for you all—not just you. So to enjoy this verse, we need to hear it together

as a whole church. God has a great plan for all of us together. Let's walk back through our passage.

### **A Prolonged Exile**

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" (Jeremiah 29:10.) The people want to leave Babylon immediately. Jeremiah prophesies that it's going to be 70 years. That's hard to hear. If you read earlier in the chapter, there are other prophets telling the people it will only be two years. That's a much better plan. The people are leaning toward those prophetic voices. Two years is tolerable. But 70 years? That's at least two, maybe three, generations that will be born in a place they don't want to be. Some of them won't be leaving exile, but will be raising their children who will be raising their children in a place of captivity. How could that be a part of God's good plan? And what does it mean that God is allowing his people to be in this place "for Babylon?" Why would God do anything for Babylon? They don't acknowledge Him. They are not His people. How is it possible that God is doing something "for the city of Babylon?" God just might be calling them to be light and life for the city where he has sent them.

### **Our Favorite Verse**

"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). So now as we read this verse again, does it feel any different? We know that God's plans for us sometimes include a prolonged stay in a place we don't want to be. And somehow our extra time in this miserable place will not only be for our own good, but for the good of others and for my children and their children. The future seems to be about the next generation. It looks like God is the God of Exodus and Rescue. And there are times when God rescues us out of bondage and difficulty. But God is also the God of Exile where He forms and shapes us in places we would rather not be.

### **God's Plan**

So, what is God's plan for us? "Then 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, "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" (Jeremiah 29:12–14). God's plan is to be found, or to put a finer point on it, God's plan is to be found by you, by me, by us. Apart from that, there really isn't another plan. For 52 chapters and 40 years, Jeremiah speaks to the people of God the Word of God, and mostly the people have not listened. Throughout Jeremiah's prophetic life, the words he speaks from God are mostly about judgment, about the people's disobedience, about God's displeasure with His people because they don't know Him anymore. Mostly, Jeremiah is ignored, rejected and threatened because he does not speak happy, uplifting prosperous words. Sometimes God's word is hard and does not sound immediately hopeful. Sometimes we can't hear God's voice because our voices are too loud. Sometimes it takes hard-

ships, pandemics, relational brokenness and severe disorientation to be in a place to hear from the Lord. Our hardness of heart and our addiction to our own comfort is powerful. Sometimes we are part of the problem. But God continues to speak.

Listen to what God reveals about Himself through Jeremiah to His people in exile just in these four verses: I will come to you, I will fulfill my good promise, I know the plans I have for you, I will be found by you, I will gather you from all the nations, I will bring you back and I carried you. The fact that God is still speaking 29 chapters into this thick book of doom and gloom is nothing short of miraculous—it tells us something important about God. God wants to be heard. God wants to be known. God reveals Himself to us over and over. God never abandons His people. Even when it feels like He has left the scene. God is there. God is right here. God wants to be found. We gravitate to Jeremiah 29:11 because in this section (and it's a small section of a very large book) Jeremiah's tone lights up like a bright light in a dark place. But you've got to read the whole story to get how bright that light is.

These are the words of a God who never gives up on us. His love and faithfulness are steadfast and eternal. These Scriptures teach us about a God who loves this world that He made. He loves the people that He has created. His heart breaks over the ravaging of sin and death in this world, but He never gives up and He never leaves us alone. God consistently calls us back to relationship with Him and to find our healing in the very place we don't want to be. And somehow in that messy, miraculous meeting with God, the light of God spills out for others to see ... for Babylon, for your children. And your children's children, the generations to come. Seventy years is a long time to be where you don't want to be. But somehow God doesn't seem too concerned about the time. God is patient. If it takes a lifetime for us to wake up to the Lord, He will pursue us. In fact, in the fullness of time, we read, God didn't send a map out of Babylon ... He sent a person. He sent Jesus. He sent Him right into the middle of our exile, and Jesus said, "Follow me." That's the plan.

I don't know what your exile feels like, but I know it's difficult. Ultimately, Jeremiah 29:11 is a call to prayer. It's a call to seek the Lord right now with our whole heart. It's a call to be vulnerable and honest. It's a call to a lifelong relationship. Pastor Mandy Smith writes this about prayer: "God wants to hear our need in all its wordless groaning, in all this color of feeling... Prayer normalized need and God can take it" (Mandy Smith, *The Vulnerable Pastor*). God want to know you and He want to be known by you.

Our plans are many. Our attempts to carve out a rich and satisfying life in this world are endless. But truly only one thing is needed ... to open ourselves up to the marvelous and graceful plan of God for our lives, for our city and for generations to come. "Follow me," says Jesus. "For I know the plans I have for you. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future." Amen.

## STUDY GUIDE

### THE BIBLE TOP 5 • "Will I Be Rich?"

#### Jeremiah 29:10–14

#### **UP:** Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word

Slowly, we are learning how to walk in a new atmosphere.

Grace is the word. Grace. John opens his gospel saying, "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." Of all the peoples of the world, the children of God must walk in the grace of God if we are to reflect this core attribute of God. This summer the word is grace. In exactly the pace at which the Lord is leading you through Covid-19, may his grace abound to you.

Begin your study in prayer. Read and reflect on Jeremiah 29:10–14.

- 1) What condition does God place on his promise at the end of verse 13?
- 2) The Hebrew word that is translated "prosper" in verse 11 is "shalom." One key meaning of "shalom" is to be whole and complete, especially in relationship with God and neighbor. Reread verse 11 and replace "prosper" with "shalom." Host a discussion about how this does or does not alter your understanding of the text this week.

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

3) Pastor Jennifer writes, "we'll have to move over our images of Tahiti, the mountain chalet, the secluded beach house ... any picture of paradise that we are reaching for that allows us to "exit" the world and replace it with a growing desire to be in right relationship with the God of the universe and rightly connected with the people (around us, in our homes and right next door)." God's word through Jeremiah this week is a word to flee comfort-rooted escapism and say yes to God's desire to use you as an agent of healing, of shalom, to the world around you. How can you take a step toward building shalom around you this week? Be specific)

#### **IN:** Connect with Each Other

Often, our plans do not align with God's plans for us. Host a conversation about what it has been like this year to adjust your plans. How might God be at work in your life this year in ways you did not expect?

Pressing into the level of vulnerability that your group has built to date, close your time in prayer. Celebrating that God's plans for you include His shalom, confess and rejoice together. Invite the Spirit to minister to your hearts. Ask God to give you the spiritual eyes to see how He desires to use you to be His witness in the coming days. Groups of 3-5 are ideal for this intimate, crucial time together.