

Sermon Series:

GREEN LEAF IN DROUGHT-TIME

God's sustaining grace in times of trouble



HOPE IN GOD

Jeremiah 29:1-14; Romans 8:28-32,37-39 (Becky Douglass)

As we continue to look at what can sustain us in difficult times, what keeps our leaves green in drought-time, we now move to the need for hope. Hope is what helps us to lift our eyes from our current situation and see the possibility of change or of a bigger picture which makes some sense of what is happening. Without hope, difficulties can become unbearable. Part of what makes our current situation so difficult is that we can't yet see an end to the lockdown. The numbers haven't really started to go down yet, and it is easy to lose hope that things will change, and we will move back to a more normal life.

To look at hope this morning, we're going to travel back to the kingdom of Judah again. A couple of weeks ago, we looked at King Hezekiah's prayer when faced with the might of Assyria. God rescued Jerusalem and Hezekiah continued to follow God and ruled the land well. However, after him, the kingdom turned away from God again. God allowed a series of attacks from Assyria, Egypt and Babylon in the following years and sent prophets to warn the people to turn back to God but to no avail. Eventually about a hundred years after Hezekiah, we read in our reading from Jeremiah that the king, his mother and many others were carried away into exile in Babylon.

When this happened, the exiles reacted in despair and anger. Psalm 137 says, "*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.*" (Psalm 137:1) This Psalm is one of the few that doesn't include even a glimmer of hope or trust in God. In fact, instead of hope in God, it ends with curses on the Babylonians, which cause us to cringe at their violence. They had no hope, only hate for their oppressors. They didn't acknowledge that their own sin had contributed to their situation, and they didn't even ask God for help.

It was then that false prophets came along, claiming that God had told them that He had changed His mind and was going to rescue them from exile. This is what they wanted to hear! They stopped settling into their new lives in Babylon. They put life on hold and got ready to head back to Jerusalem. Maybe this wasn't going to be so bad after all! They had hope again – but it was a false hope.

Jeremiah the prophet was still back in Jerusalem with those who had been left behind. Messages were travelling back and forth between Jerusalem and the exiles and news must have reached him of their belief that the exile was going to end soon. As Jeremiah prayed to God and sought wisdom from Him, he knew that those in Babylon were being led astray – both by their despair and by their hope of a swift return. They were wrong to think that God had abandoned them – He hadn't for a moment. They were also wrong to think that God had changed His mind about them being in exile – He hadn't done that either. Jeremiah sat down to write them a letter – a true message from God. In this letter, God calls them to look to Him

and to trust him because He is still their God and He is still working for their good even when it doesn't look that way.

The letter starts out - *"Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon"* (v.4) Right from the beginning, God establishes that He is still in control. They are angry with the Babylonians, but God says that He is the one who has sent them into exile. Their current position is not accidental, not out of control, but a part of His plan for them. But He also assures them that He has no intention of abandoning them there. He promises, *"When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place."* (v.10) God is firmly in control of their destiny – He has not abandoned them, and He has a plan. And he calls them to trust His plan for them. Instead of agitating to get back to Jerusalem, they are to settle down in their new lives – to build houses and plant gardens, to grow families and to prosper. Because God is in control of their situation, they are even free to stop hating their new neighbours in Babylon and to pray for them and seek to bless them – for then they will share in the blessing. God is calling them away from fear and anger and into contentment in His will for them.

As I was thinking about their situation, I was struck by the fact that they would be in exile for 70 years. This means that it would be their grandchildren or even their great-grandchildren who would be returning to Jerusalem. None of those who went into exile would return. This made me think of the Exodus. Then, the Israelites rebelled and refused to trust God to give them the Promised Land, God made them stay in the wilderness for 40 years until all the adults had died. In a sense, God was purging the Israelites of those who had caused so much trouble and allowing a new generation to take their place – for the nation to have a fresh start. In this situation, the ingrained rebellion against God must have been even worse and it would take a couple of generations to change their attitude towards God. Towards the end of our passage, God says, *"Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart."* (v.12,13) They would need those 70 years for the heart of the nation to change and to turn back to God. But when they did turn to Him, He would be there waiting for them, ready to bring them home. We saw this change of heart when we looked at Ezra recently in the Grace Groups. There, the people who return admit that they had gone into exile because of their rebellion against God. There is a humility and openness to God that we don't see when they first go into exile. Far from abandoning them, God was using the exile to help them see their need for Him and to bring them to the point where they were ready to seek Him and call upon Him - to trust Him again.

None of this had taken God by surprise. He had always known that the Israelites would not stay faithful to Him. In Moses' farewell address to them, he had told them:

"And when (not if!) all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.
(Deuteronomy 30:1-6)

They didn't trust God and so they ended up in exile. But God had promised that it wouldn't stay that way. Once they turned to Him, He would rescue them and restore them. Why?

Because that is God's character. Remember how He revealed Himself to Moses back at Mt Sinai? He said He was: *"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."* (Exodus 34:6 NIV). He had shown this character as He had given them chance upon chance to repent and turn to Him. And now He was showing this character as He sent them into exile so that they would learn to seek Him and find Him.

It is this context in which we find the verses which we all love to quote from this passage: *"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."* (v. 11) The exile, as hard as they found it, was for their good. They wouldn't see that goodness for a while – it would take 70 years and a couple of generations! – but God's plan was for their welfare and not for evil. But putting them in a place where they would turn back to Him, God was giving them a future and a hope that they would not have known otherwise. The exile was a chance for a new beginning – a new beginning full of hope as they followed God and allowed Him to be their God.

How did those in exile respond to this letter? We're not told. I am sure many rejected it – after all, the message the false prophets gave was so much more comfortable and easier to accept. But I am sure some began to think – to re-evaluate their lives in light of what God said. Maybe they decided to trust Him and so they did indeed settle into their life in Babylon and started to raise their families there. Maybe they sought out more information about God and began to change their ways to follow Him and taught their children to follow Him. And their children passed that belief on to their children and their faith in God grew. And one day, when the Babylonians were overthrown and the Persians came to power, they were ready to return to Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple, and begin a new life as God's people in the Promised Land once again. God never abandoned them. He was always working for their good, even during those 70 years they were in exile.

But how are we to respond to this today? We love to quote Jeremiah 29:11, but what does it mean to us today? Another verse that we love to quote is found in our Romans reading: *"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."* (Romans 8:28) It sounds very similar, doesn't it? Both promise us that God is always in control, working out His plans and purposes in our lives. Both call us to trust Him in whatever circumstance we find ourselves. Both assure us that God is seeking our very best in everything because both are based firmly on the character of God Himself – compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness.

I think that there are a few glorious truths from these verses that we can hang onto to matter what happens to us. (1) God is in control no matter what happens – even when everything seems to be going wrong. (2) As His children, we are surrounded by His love, and nothing can separate us from His love. The end of our Romans passage is a wonderful statement of this. (3) God will never give up on us, even if we turn away from Him. He is faithful even when we are faithless. (4) Our good, our welfare, is always His goal as He works in our lives. These truths about God give us hope in even the most difficult of circumstances.

Within the context of these wonderful truths about God, there are two things that I think we need to remember. Firstly, our good, our welfare, is tied up in our relationship with Him. God knew that as long as the Jews were in rebellion against Him, they would never experience His best for them. Likewise for us, Paul in Romans relates our good to the growth of our relationship with God - from being called by Him through being justified in Christ to finally glorified with Him. More than physical prosperity or comfort, God knows our very best is found in our relationship with Him. God never promises that our lives will be easy, but He promises that He will always be with us and will enable us to live well no matter what happens. We'll be talking more about this next week.

Secondly, He will never force Himself on us, but He will work in our lives to draw us into a closer walk with Him. God did not send His people into exile as retribution for their rebellion, but to break the cycle of sin they were in and to make a path for them to come back into a right relationship with Him. Sometimes He allows things to disrupt our lives to get our attention. I don't believe that every time something goes wrong in our lives it is because we have sinned. Many times, bad things happen to us simply because we are living in a world broken by sin. But even in these situations God is still in control and is able to use them to draw us closer to Himself and teach us more about trusting Him.

As we finish, I think it is helpful to jump to the end of the Bible to see God's ultimate plan for us. Because of God's great love for us, we have this sure hope that He will not abandon us but will bring us one day to be with Him forever when sin and pain and sorrow are no more and nothing can come between us.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, ... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."
(Revelation 21:1-5)