

+ Jeremiah 29:10-12 + The Lord Has Plans + New Year's Eve + 31 December 2013 +

Seventy years? Can you imagine being told that you and your fellow believers have to wait 70 years for God to fulfill his promise? That time span would be pretty depressing for most of us, but there was good reason why they had to wait. You see, 586 B.C. was not a good year for God's people.

That year the Lord used King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire to carry out his judgment on the Kingdom of Judah for centuries of wickedness, rebellion, and sin against the true God. The Babylonian armies laid waste to the tiny kingdom and besieged the capital city of Jerusalem. The prophet Jeremiah had the unenviable task of telling the Jews that it would be better for them if they surrendered because the Lord was about to destroy Jerusalem.

Few people listened—only those who remained faithful to the Lord, and God carried out his judgment. Judah was devastated. Jerusalem was burned to the ground and the glorious temple of the Lord was completely destroyed. Countless people lost their lives. Nearly all the survivors, except the poorest, were hauled off into exile 1,000 miles away in faraway Babylon. Many wondered if they even had a future. Would they end up like their cousins to the north scattered across the known world never to return? Would they ever see home again? False prophets jumped on these fears and promised a quick return, but the Lord through his genuine prophet Jeremiah disproved such pipe dreams.

“When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.” Cold comfort for people who had lost everything, who had lost countless loved ones, who were dealing with their own pain and grief and disappointment. “Really, Lord!? 70 years!? You want us to wait for 70 years, and even settle in this foreign land, even pray for these unclean foreigners and ***“for the peace and prosperity of the city!”*** Are you kidding?!” (Jeremiah 29:7)

Yet those people had rejected the true God. In rebellion, they had strayed far away from their gracious God, giving him mere lip service and going through the motions in worship. Their hearts were far from him. They had rejected and murdered his prophets. They had chased after the gods of other nations or worshiped at the altar of greed. They had brought this judgment on themselves, and like their ancestors who had rejected God's grace and blessing in the wilderness, they would have to wait.

Most adults would never see home again. So they could either give up on the Lord, who had graciously blessed them for centuries, or read the rest of the letter. Yes, it was going to be “seventy years”, but for those who trusted in the Lord, there was also a promise of sweet Gospel.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD... The Lord wasn't being inconsiderate. His plans were not made on a whim, like a little boy squishing ants and letting some live. No, ***“I know the plans I have for you...”*** The all-knowing God wasn't going to miss a single detail, but instead made those plans with great care for sinners whom he loved.

What were those plans the Lord had for his people? ***“...Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*** The Lord was going to bless his faithful people even if it meant showing them tough love with his disciplining hand. His plans for them were not meant to destroy them or bring them disaster of an eternal kind, but to keep the many promises of a future centered in the coming Messiah. You see, the Lord had already made many promises about the why and where and how of the coming Messiah—the King who was going to be born back in Bethlehem. The Lord of grace was assuring his people that even if they didn't see home again, he would still provide their Savior when and where he promised.

Those plans for the good of God's people would give them ***“hope”***. In the coming Savior, they would have a future. In him, they could have confident patience as they waited on the Lord. They could have the confident patience to obey his will and serve him, to settle down and prosper, because the fulfillment of all those gracious promises was coming. In the end, seventy years wouldn't be all that long on God's timeline of grace.

In the decades that followed, the Lord did bless them richly. In fact, so richly that only a sizable remnant returned to the land of their fathers, while others stayed and served the Lord. The Lord did bring the Hope of Israel into this world when and where he planned, and that Savior did take away the sins of the generations before and after him. Chance had nothing to do with it. No, the Lord fulfilled his plans for his people for their good as he promised.

So what about us? What about the Lord's plans for you and me? Looking back on 2013, in many ways it was a year of challenge and uncertainty, blocked opportunities and the cross of grief and woe. There was even a

noticeable uptick in attacks on Christians in the public square, but 2013 was not 586 B.C. The Lord withheld his judgment on our land, so the Gospel is still freely proclaimed here and spreading around the world.

Really it was a year of grace. The Gospel was proclaimed. Souls were welcomed into God's family through Holy Baptism. God's people were fed and strengthened at the Lord's Table and in the study and hearing of God's Word. The Lord in his grace continued to bless us personally and as a congregation and even as a nation. Our Lord has not turned his back on us.

...But our questions still linger. From losing loved ones and getting bad news about our financing application in the spring to economic struggles and a very evident increase in anti-Christian hostility, there was a lot that left us wondering, "What next? Why this, O Lord? Why now? Is this your plan? If it's not, then what is your plan, O Lord?"

With all those questions, do you find yourself looking ahead at 2014 with some fear and trepidation, with uncertainty and worry and resignation? Will we get more bad news as a family, as a congregation, as a country? What challenge or grief or pain is coming in the New Year? Will the cross of following Christ get heavier? What will happen to the plans that I and my loved ones and my church family are making as we enter another year of grace? Will they happen?

Let's go back to that promise of sweet Gospel that the Lord had for his people 2,600 years ago. Yes, it was directed towards the exiles waiting in Babylon, but it's also meant for us today. **"I know the plans I have for you."** The Lord, who spoke those words through Jeremiah, is the same Lord who speaks to us through his Word. God is not inconsiderate of where you're at right now. He's not going to ignore the details of what's going on in your life. In fact, he's already put great care into his plan to save you. Consider how he brought you to faith through contact with his saving Gospel, how he made you his own through Holy Baptism, how he has provided for you and protected you and blessed you every second of your life. That same God isn't going to suddenly turn his back on you and ignore you and your life. No, he has a plan for you and a plan for your family in Christ.

How can we be sure about that? **"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."** The Lord's plans for those who trust in him are never thrown together on a whim. Chance has nothing to do with it. God's plans are carefully laid out for your good, even when he allows you to bear a cross as you follow him or when he disciplines you with tough love or when he closes opportunities or changes human plans to carry out his divine, eternal plan.

God's plans are not meant to destroy you, but to give you a future in Christ. He doesn't promise to give us all the details and often we may simply have to wait until we're with him in glory to understand his plans made for you and me and even for our congregation. Yet we do know one thing beyond the shadow of a doubt: the Lord's plans always involve a future in Christ and real hope in Christ. He did carry out his plan to save you from your sins by sending his own Son to live and die and rise again for you. At times as we follow Jesus, God's plan isn't always obvious, but in Christ, he completes it for us. In Christ, then, we have a future. In Christ, we have real hope.

So how do we respond? God himself tells us. **"Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you."** The Lord of grace doesn't turn a deaf ear to your prayers, but instead because he's in control of all things and has a plan for us, whatever it might be, he wants us to worship him, to call upon his name in everything, and to offer our prayers to him. As part of his plans, God always wants to draw us closer to himself.

My friends, even though I was named after a prophet, I can't tell you what's going to happen in 2014, let alone tomorrow. I don't know what the Lord has planned for you or me or his people. I don't know who will be here next year or what things will look like around here or anywhere else. Yet I know this and you can be confident of this too. Your Lord knows and he knows how he is going to help you bear a cross or get you through tough times or dry your tears. He knows how he's going to bless you richly with his grace in ways you expect and ways you don't, because that's what he's promised. **"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."** In Christ, have a blessed New Year! Amen.