



HOW TO LIVE AS A CHRISTIAN DURING STRANGE TIMES: LESSONS FROM JEREMIAH'S LETTER TO THE CAPTIVES

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About the Series

The Greater Heritage *Ministry Helps* series of booklets teach important and relevant biblical topics in practical ways to help ministry professionals and believers grow spiritually and walk closer with Christ.

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Lessons from Jeremiah's Letter to the Captives*
by *Christian McShaffrey*
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Contents

Introduction *1*

1 Acknowledge the Sovereignty of God *2*

2 Listen for God's Voice in Scripture *4*

3 Just Keep Living a Normal Life *7*

4 Don't Allow Liars to Deceive You *10*

5 Believe That Better Days Are Coming *13*

Conclusion *15*

**How to Live as a Christian during Strange Times:
Lessons from Jeremiah's Letter to the Captives (Jer. 29:1-14)
by Christian McShaffrey, MDiv**

-Introduction-

“Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon; build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters . . .”

Few, I suppose, would deny that we are living in strange times. The word “unprecedented” has been essentially worn out through over-use and while I will not review all the “unprecedented” events we have recently experienced in America, I will say this: Most Christians are starting to feel like strangers living in a strange land.

That is a very good thing. No, it is not a good feeling, but it is good because that is how the Holy Bible describes us. In both Old and New Testaments, we are described as strangers, pilgrims, exiles, those who are IN the world, but not OF it,

citizens of heaven who are seeking a heavenly country; but who are also (even at the same time) citizens of earthly commonwealths, stuck in godless cultures, surrounded by unbelievers, and sometimes even oppressed.

The reality of that dual-citizenship had hit Jeremiah's friends like a ton of bricks. Their city was sacked, their temple destroyed, their houses burned, the able-bodied men put in chains, and their brightest minds put to work in the Babylonian palace. They were very much in shock and some, it seems, were even in a state of denial; so Jeremiah sent a letter that they come to terms with their situation and survive it.

I am convinced that Christians today need to do the same (i.e., come to terms with our current cultural situation and survive it), so please allow Jeremiah's letter to the captives to accomplish that good end. His counsel can be summarized into five practical words of advice.

-I-

Acknowledge the Sovereignty of God

This, of course, is one of the core doctrines of Reformed theology. We acknowledge the absolute and all-encompassing sovereignty of God. From the rise and fall of nations, to the salvation of individual sinners, to a little sparrow falling to the

ground, even to the very number of hairs on our head; the Lord is sovereign over all.

Many recoil at the thought, but the Bible-believer not only receives this doctrine as true, but realizes that it is the only way he can make sense of his experience in this world (especially the bad experiences).

The Babylonian captivity was, arguably, the lowest point in the history of God's people. They had lost everything and were now living as exiles in an extremely evil culture. They believed God, trusted in God, and had tasted and seen that the Lord is good. So why this? What had happened? Who, you might say, was to blame?

From an earthly perspective, the Babylonians certainly shared much of the blame. They are the ones who attacked Jerusalem in the first place, put them under tribute, kidnapped Daniel and his friends, attacked yet again, and finally razed it to the ground. One might also place some of the blame on God's own people, for when he constituted them as a nation he also warned them that disobedience would result in discipline, even enemy invasions and exile.

Nevertheless, while we can acknowledge the ambition of Nebuchadnezzar and the iniquity of Jerusalem as true causes of the captivity, they were but secondary causes. The chief cause of all things (including calamity) was, and always is, God Almighty. This is clearly affirmed in vs. 4, *Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon . . .*

Do you believe that? Do you accept the attribute of God that we call his absolute sovereignty? You must or, again, you will never be able to make sense of your experiences under the sun. Worse, you might not even survive that feeling of being a stranger in a strange land. God wants you to survive, so he first declares his sovereignty over the situation.

-2-

Listen for God's Voice in Scripture

The phrase in vs. 4, *Thus saith the LORD of hosts* is always the best news to hear (especially in Babylon). God was speaking to his people from heaven. The God of the Bible is a speaking God. He does not communicate himself through feelings or emotions or irrational ecstasies. He communicates through words, and vv. 1-4 show us something of how that works.

Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent . . . (vs. 1). This is the doctrine of divine inspiration and 2 Peter 1:21 explains it even further: *the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*. God, the Holy Ghost, moved Jeremiah's pen as he wrote, ensuring that every word written in that letter was perfectly true.

Connected to this crucial doctrine of inspiration is also that of transmission, for vs. 1 says the letter was *sent from Jerusalem unto the residue of the elders which were carried away captives, and to the priests, and to the prophets*, etc. This inspired letter needed to travel almost a thousand miles before it reached its intended audience, so how could Jeremiah be sure that it would arrive intact and unaltered by the false prophets that were in the land? Was it that *the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan* (vs. 3) was so strong? We can probably assume that *Elasah* and *Gemariah* were trustworthy enough as messengers, but this is no safe source of certainty.

Ultimately speaking, it is our sovereign God who keeps his word pure and entire. It is called the doctrine of preservation, and it affirms that the same God who inspires scripture also protects it by his singular care and providence (even if that

involves a thousand miles, or a thousand years, or a thousand manuscripts).

The believer must trust God to preserve his word, else how could he ever receive it as God's word? That is, after all, what the exiles were supposed to do: They were to receive this letter not as the words of Jeremiah, but as the very words of God.

That duty applied to all, for vs. 1 mentions *the elders, the priests, the prophets, and all the people*. Also mentioned in vs. 2 is *the king, the queen, eunuchs, princes, carpenters, and smiths*. The specific mention of so many different individuals in such diverse stations of life lends itself to an important universal application: You also need to listen for the voice of God in scripture, and when you hear it, you need to receive it as God's word and *with all readiness of mind*.

Embrace, my fellow-exiles, these essential doctrines of God's Sovereignty, Divine Inspiration, and Providential Preservation so that you can, first of all, make sense of your experience in this world, but even more importantly, know how to live within it.

-3-

Just Keep Living a Normal Life

Though the captivity was a great tragedy and a sore chastisement from God, it was no reason for God's people to give up hope or to start acting strange. They were still God's people and God wanted them to act like his people (yes, even in Babylon). This would look very, very normal.

The first word of practical advice is *Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them . . .* (vs. 5) which assumes that they were going to be in Babylon for a long time. The substance of this counsel is, "Just settle down, settle in, and enjoy the simple pleasures of life." In order to follow this advice, they would, of course, have to find gainful employment in Babylon (it obviously takes money to build a house) and this is where many stumble; but their scruples are without scriptural support. Daniel kept a clean heart while working for his pagan boss, so they could do the same. You can do the same.

The second word of practical advice is *Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished* (vs. 6). Modern paraphrase: "Find a girl, fall in love, get married, and have lots of babies."

Many stumble at this point as well, but also without cause. Marriage and procreation are also some of the simple pleasures of normal life under the sun. Besides that, Jeremiah adds a theological reason for receiving this advice: *that ye may be increased there, and not diminished.*

Previously mentioned was that temptation to give up hope while living in Babylon, and begetting children is an act of hope. It is a very practical way to affirm, to embrace, even to cling to the promise of God: *I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee* (Gen. 17:7). The Christian must never give up hope.

The other temptation mentioned was that of acting odd. People tend to do this when facing unfamiliar situations or an uncertain future, but the believer must never be *soon shaken in mind*. This was not the time for conspiracies, militias, or storming of the Babylonian Capitol. God's way of strengthening his kingdom is far more quiet and far more sensible: Have babies and *bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.*

Sure, the objection will be voiced, “But the Babylonians are making that very difficult! They have this book in the public schools, ‘Heather Has Two Mommies.’ They have ‘Trans Story Time’ at the local library. They are placing restrictions on how many people can meet for worship. Now, they want us to bow before an idol. They are going to throw Daniel into the fiery furnace!”

Yep, welcome to Babylon. What else did you expect?

To the anticipated response, “We have to do something!” I will voice no disagreement. We should do something and here it is (divinely inspired of God): Get married, have kids, build a house, plant a garden, etc. Those who cannot receive that advice will never be open to that which follows: *seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace* (vs. 7).

The New Testament version of this exhortation is found in 1 Timothy 2:1-3, *I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.*

The application is inescapable: Jeremiah's friends needed to *seek the peace* of Babylon and pray for Nebuchadnezzar. Paul's friends needed to *seek the peace* of the Roman Empire and pray for Nero Caesar. We need to *seek the peace* of the United States of America and pray for President Biden.

Some unsettled soul will undoubtedly here object, "He's not my President!" Come now, and read again the phrase *whither I have caused you to be carried away captives* (vs. 7). Realize that when God puts us somewhere, it is God who put us there. Acknowledge that truth and obey his clear command: *seek the peace*. This command is also very reasonable, for he adds: *in the peace thereof* (i.e., of Babylon, or Rome, or the USA) *shall ye have peace*.

Christians are not trouble-makers. They are just the opposite, as Jesus said: *Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God*. Pursue peace and you will be blessed. If anyone suggests otherwise, he is a liar and ought to be avoided.

-4-

Don't Allow Liars to Deceive You

Jeremiah was obviously not the only prophet of his day. The Lord had raised up several *holy men* to preach, prophesy, and write about this era of exile; and unfortunately, so had the devil.

That is why Jeremiah had to issue the stern warning of vv. 8-9, *For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Let not your prophets and your diviners, that be in the midst of you, deceive you, neither hearken to your dreams which ye cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely unto you in my name: I have not sent them, saith the Lord.*

This is a call to spiritual discernment and the step toward discernment is understanding that false teachers, liars, and prophets of the devil are not only found out there in the big bad world; but oftentimes in the church. That is why Jeremiah calls them *your prophets and your diviners, that be in the midst of you*. These were not Babylonian mystics, but their own brethren. That always makes discernment somewhat complicated.

The New Testament affirms the same dynamic. Acts 20:28-30, *Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.*

While we all tend to take down our guard (at least a little) when we perceive that someone is one-of-us (e.g., “Well, he is from

such-and-such denomination . . . or so-and-so endorsed his book. . .”), that is no safe method of spiritual discernment.

An added complication to the process of discernment is that false teachers speak in God’s name. This is affirmed in vs. 9: *they prophesy falsely unto you in my name*. The most dangerous deceivers in this world will always have a Bible in their hands. They read from it, they quote, yet all they are really doing is twisting *unto their own destruction*. God needs you to know: *I have not sent them, saith the Lord*.

In issuing this warning, Jeremiah does not disclose exactly what the false prophets were teaching, but it is probably safe enough to speculate because false teachers usually just tell people what they want to hear. If you were living in this exile what would your *itching ears* want to hear?

Some would want to hear, “Don’t worry, you will not be here long. We are going to escape. God is going to rapture us out of here any day now.” Others might long to hear, “Don’t give up hope! We are going to rise up and fight! In God’s name, we will bring Babylon to its knees!”

Based on modern trends, most would probably prefer to hear, “Stop obsessing over the exile, God put us here and wants us

here.” So far, so good, but then enters the lie: “We are Babylonians now and you know what they say: when in Babylon, do as the Babylonians do.”

No. This letter (and only this letter) was given that these captives might make sense of their experience, sanctify themselves through obedience, and find true hope for the future. That hope had nothing to do with a great escape, or an insurrection, or conformity to the culture, or anything else the false prophets were preaching. It consisted, rather, in biblical hope.

-5-

Believe That Better Days Are Coming

As low a point in history as the captivity was, God was still God, God was still sovereign, God still answered prayers, and God had good plans for his people. Better days were coming and the captives needed to believe that with all their hearts. vs. 10, *Thus saith the Lord: That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.*

God Visits His People - The captivity would not be permanent. After seventy years, God would visit these captives and bring them back home. Seventy years, however, is a long time. Most

of the young men who were carried away would never live to see the day, but hope still remained.

God Keeps His Promises - While many would die in captivity, their children and grandchildren would live to see this day of visitation and be able to say: “God kept his word. His promises are always yes and amen.” They are certainly that, but they are not always fulfilled immediately. When the children of the captivity arrived at Jerusalem, they found it still broken down. Hope yet remained.

God Builds His Kingdom - As scripture teaches, God is faithful to raise up men like Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to rebuild his temple, teach his people, and fortify his city. His faithfulness in the past should convince us of his faithfulness in the present and the future. Better days were coming.

God is Always Good - Though he may chastise for a season, God always has good plans for his people: *I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end* (vs. 11). The captives needed to set their hearts upon this infallible truth and seek those better days by faith.

God Answers Prayer - According to vv. 12-13, if these captives sought the Lord with all their hearts, the Lord would look down from heaven with tender mercy and grant them all the grace they needed in this, their time of need. He would also, eventually, bring them home.

God Gathers His People - Though scattered now as a people, the promise of vs. 14 is that God would call them out *from all the nations*, gather them to himself, and bring them back home. That is exactly what happened. After the appointed seventy years, God brought them back home, just as God promised.

There is also a New Testament fulfillment to this promise; namely, that thousands more are being called *out of all the nations* every single Lord's Day through the preaching of the holy gospel. We know this because Jesus said: *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me* (Jn. 10:27).

-Conclusion-

Have you heard the Shepherd's voice? Would you now follow him? Even if it means living as a stranger in a strange land? Even if it means feeling out-of-place in these United States of Babylon? If so, then praise God and consider the advice that has here been offered that you might not only survive, but even

thrive in these strange times: Acknowledge the Sovereignty of God - Listen for God's Voice in Scripture - Just Keep Living a Normal Life - Don't Allow Liars to Deceive You - and Believe that Better Days are Coming.

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