

## Captivity, Frustration, and Other Blessings

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Fretting on my couch, I shook my head. My call to ministry was coming into focus, and I didn't like it one bit. I thumbed anxiously through my Bible, desperate for a word of hope. Instead, the word I got was angular and strange: "exile."

Still, the passage from Scripture that God pressed into my heart (Jer 29:4-14) was oddly comforting. It continues to speak to me in surprising ways.

Forgive me for breaking the news: ministry is tough. It can be glorious—but it can also be grueling. Excessive expectations, strained relationships, Alice-in-Wonderland moments when nothing seems to make much sense—and all this on a salary that adds insult to injury. Best to check your ego at the door.

It was those classic, encouraging words that lured me in:

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 (Jer 29:11 ESV).

It has not been, however, this comforting promise that has kept me afloat—but rather its discomfiting context: the prospect of long-term exile. I understand that equating Christian ministry to Babylonian captivity sounds defiantly ungrateful. But it's just the opposite: I've found myself welling up with thanksgiving as I've owned my identity as an exile. And along the way, four themes from Jeremiah 29 have helped me greatly.

### 1. Alienated

To all the exiles whom I have sent into exile (Jer 29:4).

How could anything at all feel right to the Israelites who were bundled off to Babylon? Defeated and uprooted, strangers in a strange land, they were the very definition of "alienated." (Their ministers of music would feel it acutely, required to put a happy face on their praise songs by the very captors who had dragged them into dislocation. See Psalm 137.)

And still, God's word to these exiles was that they were, at this precise juncture,



smack in the middle of God's purpose and plan (v. 11). God had good things for them to experience and accomplish right in the midst of alienated pain and disorientation. This notion—that God's *Plan A* can seem pretty awful—has been a source of strange comfort to me. I keep naively expecting that if God has deployed me somewhere, I'll feel at home. Rather, I often feel dislocated and out of place. It's liberating to know that, here in holy exile, my sense of alienation may be bound right up with God's plan.

## 2. All in

Build houses and live in them. . . . Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile (Jer 29: 5,7).

Jeremiah's strange words to the dislocated Israelites were surprisingly positive. Invest fully in this unwelcome assignment. Engage wholeheartedly. Plant gardens and raise families. Flourish!

It would seem natural—even noble—for these prisoners to be at least passively resistant. But no, says Jeremiah: be actively engaged.

After accepting my current ministry position, I had half a mind to keep scanning the want ads. I was willing to serve my time—so long as I could plan my escape. But Elissa (my annoyingly wise wife) shook her head. "Wrong attitude," she said—voicing what I already knew. I am not called here to bide my time, but to redeem the time. I am here to pray and work for the peace and prosperity of this not-God-forsaken ministry. I am to work up a sweat tilling the ground and cultivating the crops. I am not a tumbleweed waiting for the next gust of wind, but rather a tree sinking my roots into this particular soil. I am to bloom right here where I have been planted.

## 3. Alloyed

In its welfare you will find your welfare (Jer 29:7).

God prescribed for his people a startlingly intimate interrelationship with the city full of their abductors. "Its welfare . . . your welfare" (Jer 29:7b). I suspect that something more is here than pure pragmatism or a Hebrew version of karma. Rather, the *shalom* of these captives—their deep-rooted flourishing—was now somehow fused together with that of this alien place. Strangers and strange land would now be alloyed together.

I can't explain it, but I've experienced it. Something within me has been woven together with the church I serve. I'm even starting to recognize a pattern. Someone in my ministry offends me; I take my bruised ego before the Lord; soon enough, my innards begin healing in places I never knew were injured. Afterwards, I'm more whole, set free to serve in fuller, freer, cleaner ways. Insult led to injury, injury led to

healing, and healing now leads my church and me to deeper (mutual!) well-being. *Shalom*, indeed.

I often feel alienated in my ministry. But the truth about my church and me? We're alloyed together.

#### 4. (After)

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. . . .  
And I will bring you back (Jer 29:13-14).

Despite their Babylonian *shalom*, these exiles longed for home. They yearned for Jerusalem and worship done right. The question could never be far from their minds: What is God's endgame, here? What comes after?

What these dislocated ones did know was that in seventy long years, God would bring them (or rather, their descendants) back to Jerusalem. In the meantime, what was called for was a pretty neat trick: fully invest yourself—but yearn for more. Make yourself at home—but remember: this isn't your home.

The question is familiar enough to those of us in ministry. What comes after? Or better—what is God after?

Apparently, what God seeks is to be sought. For these Israelites, the trigger for their turnaround—the threshold for their release—would be the point at which they seek God with all their hearts. And rest assured: if ministry in alienation does anything, it leads us unceremoniously to the end of ourselves. Here we are pressed to seek the One who is utterly beyond us. Good! Good for us, good for our ministries, and good for the ongoing work of Christ within us.

And that, after all, is apparently what God is after.

Ministry is hard.  
God is good.  
I am in exile.  
Praise be to God.

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