

Jeremiah 29:1-32
The Letter Wars
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The order of events in Jeremiah 29 is as follows: 1) Jeremiah wrote to the Jewish captives God sent to Babylon and informed them that God's plan was for them to stay there for seventy years and to settle in for the long haul (Jer 29:1-23). 2) Shemaiah, a captive in Babylon, wrote to Zephaniah the priest and contradicted what Jeremiah was saying (Jer 29:24-28), and requested that Zephaniah reprimand Jeremiah for his words (Jer 29:27-28). 3) Zephaniah read Shemaiah's letter to Jeremiah (Jer 29:29), and God told Jeremiah to write to the exiles and pronounce a judgment on Shemaiah (Jer 29:30-32).

Letter #1 – Jeremiah Writes to the Captives in Babylon

Now these are the words of **the letter** which Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets and all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ² (This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the court officials, the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem.) (Jer 29:1-2)

Jeremiah 29:1-23 reveals the contents of a letter that God's prophet wrote to the Jewish captives in Babylon. In the opening verse it is said that Nebuchadnezzar had taken these Judahites into exile (Jer 29:1; cf., Jer 27:20). However, we know from previous passages that God was the primary agent who made this happen, declaring He had sent them into captivity (Jer 29:4, 14), and that Nebuchadnezzar was His servant to accomplish this (Jer 25:9; 27:6). From the divine perspective we observe the difference between primary and secondary causes for Judah's captivity. God was the primary cause and Nebuchadnezzar was the secondary cause.

Jeremiah's letter was sent "after King Jeconiah and the queen mother" had been taken from Jerusalem to Babylon. This would place the date of the letter sometime after 597 B.C. The purpose of Jeremiah's letter was to provide divine viewpoint for the Jewish captives so they might properly interpret their circumstances and live as God directed. Those Jews who operated from the divine perspective could properly execute God's will and ensure their progeny would survive to experience a future hope that God promised would follow their captivity.

The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, saying, ⁴ “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, ⁵ ‘Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their produce. ⁶ ‘Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. ⁷ ‘Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.’ ⁸ “For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your diviners deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream.’ ⁹ ‘For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD. (Jer 29:3-9)

Jeremiah’s letter was sent by royal couriers, probably along with other letters to the Jewish captives (Jer 29:3). The letter opens with the typical authority of a prophet who said, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel” (Jer 29:4a). And God identifies the recipients of the letter as “all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon” (Jer 29:4b). The Hebrew verb גָּלָה *galah*, translated *sent*, denotes causative action on the part of God (hiphil, first person, singular), and is repeated twice more in the letter for clarity and emphasis (Jer 29:7, 14). It is God who controls their lives and destinies, and He reveals His plans for them and provides clear directives that they might live and prosper in their captivity.

God’s will for His people in exile was that they settle in for the long haul. The Lord’s directive is that they “Build houses and live in them; and plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease” (Jer 29:5-6). These verses help to provide a glimpse into what life was like during the Babylonian captivity. Jews, though uprooted from Judah and taken by force to Babylon, were given a modicum of freedom in their new location to build houses, plant gardens, get married and raise families. (What’s interesting is that over time, life in Babylon became so good for the Jews that by the end of their captivity many did not want to return to Jerusalem.) Furthermore, God instructed His people, saying, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare” (Jer 29:7). Their peace and prosperity were tied to the city, and to seek its welfare was to seek their own welfare. While in captivity, God intended His people to be peacemakers, not troublemakers. Here, we might find a parallel to

Paul's letter to Timothy, in which prayers are to be offered on behalf of Gentile rulers that we might live a godly and peaceful life (1 Tim 2:1-4).

Naturally, being uprooted and transported hundreds of miles to a new location would be a disruptive cultural shift for these Israelites. Once there, some patriots might feel compelled to engage in acts of rebellion and resist their Babylonian captors. Such an attitude would have made fertile ground for the false prophets to contradict God and give false hope, which apparently was happening. For this reason, God told His people in captivity, "Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your diviners deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them" (Jer 29:8-9). God's Word can sometimes be difficult to accept, as it reveals things contrary to what His people want to hear. The dangers of false prophets are that they'll tell others only what they want to hear, and even do it in the name of the Lord. But Jeremiah faithfully communicated God's Word, and those who accepted it would walk in God's will. God continued to reveal His plans for His people, saying:

"For thus says the LORD, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ 'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. ¹² 'Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ 'You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴ 'I will be found by you,' declares the LORD, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the LORD, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.'" (Jer 29:10-14)

God did not leave His people guessing about the duration of their stay in Babylon, informing them it would last "seventy years" (Jer 29:10a). This is the second time in the book of Jeremiah that the duration of captivity had been revealed (Jer 25:11-12). After the completion of God's corrective suffering, He promised to bring His people back into the land (Jer 29:10b), and this according to His plans for them (Jer 29:11a), which were "plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope" (Jer 29:11b). Israelites in Babylonian captivity could claim God's promise of future restoration, which gave them hope to cope. But such hope was future—seventy years future—and unavoidable suffering in Babylon needed to happen first. God's future plan for them did not contradict His present plan for seventy years of suffering. Too often, Christians rifle through the Bible and cherry pick a verse that sounds good to them because it makes them feel good, completely ignoring the

context of the passage, its audience, and historical significance. To be clear, Jeremiah 29:11 was specifically written to Jews who had been in sinful rebellion, were under divine discipline, living in Babylonian captivity, and needed to suffer corrective discipline for seventy years. After the seventy years of suffering, then—and only then—could they expect God to execute His good plan for them by bringing them back into the land. At that time, they would seek Him and call upon Him, and He would listen (Jer 29:12). These would truly search for the Lord with all their heart (Jer 29:13), and God would let Himself be found, promising to restore their fortunes and bring them back into the land from where He had driven them (Jer 29:14).

It should be noted that God permitted some of His servants to go into captivity, though they had not personally been disobedient to Him. Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah, Mishael, and Ezekiel went into captivity, and these were used by the Lord in that place. God sometimes allows His innocent people to be swept up in the judgment He brings upon a nation, and this because He plans to use them to serve as His representatives.

Jeremiah then speaks to the Babylonian captives concerning their brethren who were left in Judah and reveals God’s judgment on them would be severe.

“You have said, ‘The LORD has raised up prophets for us in Babylon ‘—¹⁶ for thus says the LORD concerning the king who sits on the throne of David, and concerning all the people who dwell in this city, your brothers who did not go with you into exile—¹⁷ thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Behold, I am sending upon them the sword, famine and pestilence, and I will make them like split-open figs that cannot be eaten due to rotteness. ¹⁸ ‘I will pursue them with the sword, with famine and with pestilence; and I will make them a terror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse and a horror and a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them, ¹⁹ **because** they have not listened to My words,’ declares the LORD, ‘which I sent to them again and again by My servants the prophets; but you did not listen,’ declares the LORD. (Jer 29:15-19)

Those who remained in Judah would face the greater judgment of God, which He promised to bring upon them, which they deserved, because they refused to listen to His word. Multiple times God makes it clear that He is the reason for their suffering (Jer 29:15-18). Apparently, the false prophets in Babylon were proclaiming they would return to Jerusalem within a few years (cf., Jer 28:2-4). However, the captives were safer and better off than the Jews living in Jerusalem, who were facing greater punishment from God. Twice He declared He would send sword, famine and

pestilence on them (Jer 29:17-18a) and that they would be “a terror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse and a horror and a hissing, and a reproach among all the nation” (Jer 29:18b). This happened “because they have not listened to My words,” declares the LORD, “which I sent to them again and again by My servants the prophets; but you did not listen,” declares the LORD” (Jer 29:19). The words of God’s prophets were rooted in the Mosaic Covenant, which promised blessing to those who obeyed and cursing if they did not obey (Deut 11:26-28). Because Judah was repeatedly disobedient, God sent judgment upon them as He promised (see Deut 28:15, 20, 45-47, 62). God is always faithful to keep His word, either for blessing or judgment. However, God’s judgment did not mean the relationship would end. The Lord’s unilateral covenants cannot be destroyed; therefore, Israel cannot cease to exist (Jer 31:35-36). Returning to the exiles, the Lord said:

“You, therefore, hear the word of the LORD, all you exiles, whom I have sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon.²¹ “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab the son of Kolaiah and concerning Zedekiah the son of Maaseiah, who are prophesying to you falsely in My name, ‘Behold, I will deliver them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and he will slay them before your eyes.’²² ‘Because of them a curse will be used by all the exiles from Judah who are in Babylon, saying, “May the LORD make you like Zedekiah and like Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire,²³ **because** they have acted foolishly in Israel, and have committed adultery with their neighbors’ wives and have spoken words in My name falsely, which I did not command them; and I am He who knows and am a witness,” declares the LORD.’” (Jer 29:20-23)

In this section, God calls out two false prophets in Babylon, namely “Ahab the son of Kolaiah and...Zedekiah the son of Maaseiah” (Jer 29:21). God declared these false prophets would be delivered to Nebuchadnezzar who will “slay them” in the sight of other exiles (Jer 29:21b). Afterwards, the names and type of death of these two false prophets would be used among the exiles to describe others who are cursed, saying, “May the LORD make you like Zedekiah and like Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire” (Jer 29:22). The reference to being “roasted in the fire” likely alludes to a practice in Babylon of burning people alive for disobedience to the king (cf. Dan 3:6, 19-21). From God’s perspective, these two false prophets—like all false prophets—acted foolishly. Of them, God named two sins, saying they had “committed adultery with their neighbors’ wives and have spoken words in My name falsely, which I did not command them” (Jer 29:23a). These two men were both sexually immoral and false prophets. Both activities reveal these men were

more concerned about their own sinful self-interests rather than the interests of others, whether fellow Israelites in captivity or the Lord Himself.

Letter #2 – Shemaiah Writes to Zephaniah to Reprimand Jeremiah

To Shemaiah the Nehelamite you shall speak, saying, ²⁵ “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Because you have sent **letters** in your own name to all the people who are in Jerusalem, and to Zephaniah the son of Maaseiah, the priest, and to all the priests, saying, ²⁶ “The LORD has made you priest instead of Jehoiada the priest, to be the overseer in the house of the LORD over every madman who prophesies, to put him in the stocks and in the iron collar, ²⁷ now then, why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth who prophesies to you? ²⁸ “For he has sent to us in Babylon, saying, ‘The exile will be long; build houses and live in them and plant gardens and eat their produce.’” (Jer 29:24-28)

Here, the false prophet Shemaiah (who lived in Babylon), boldly questioned Zephaniah (who lived in Jerusalem), as to why Zephaniah tolerated the prophesies of Jeremiah. Shemaiah obviously regarded himself as a true prophet and regarded Jeremiah as a “madman” who should be placed in “stocks and in the iron collar” (Jer 29:26). Shemaiah wanted to know why Zephaniah had “not rebuked” Jeremiah because of his prophesies (Jer 29:27), as Jeremiah had been telling the exiles their stay would be long, and to “build houses and live in them and plant gardens and eat their produce” (Jer 29:8). Clearly Shemaiah understood Jeremiah’s message, but did not agree with it, and sought to employ force to cancel Jeremiah and his message. Such are the tactics who those who live by Satanic values. But God would not let Jeremiah’s message be suppressed, and instructed His prophet to write back to Shemaiah with a message of judgment concerning him and his family.

Letter #3 – Jeremiah Writes to the Exiles

Zephaniah the priest read this **letter** to Jeremiah the prophet. ³⁰ Then came the word of the LORD to Jeremiah, saying, ³¹ “Send to all the exiles, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD concerning Shemaiah the Nehelamite, “Because Shemaiah has prophesied to you, although I did not send him, and he has made you trust in a lie,” ³² therefore thus says the LORD, “Behold, I am about to punish Shemaiah the Nehelamite and his descendants; he will not have anyone living among this people, and he will not see the good that I am about to do to My people,” declares the LORD, “**because** he has preached rebellion against the LORD.” (Jer 29:29-32)

Zephaniah the priest, rather than following the instructions given by Shemaiah, read the letter to Jeremiah (Jer 29:29), which implied they were friends. God intervened and gave Jeremiah words to reply (Jer 29:30). Jeremiah's letter was to be read publicly "to all the exiles" living in Babylon (Jer 29:31a). God revealed that Shemaiah was a false prophet, that God had not sent him, and that he was influencing others to "trust in a lie" (Jer 29:31b). A lie (שֶׁקֶר *sheqer* – used by Jeremiah 22 times) refers to a falsehood, a deception that twists facts and has no basis in reality. Specifically, Shemaiah's lie was about God and His plans for His people, which led them to have false hope. Sadly, a corrupt leader will not hesitate to manufacture lies as a means of controlling others. The lie seeks to control the narrative that serves one's own self-interests, caring little about the harm it inflicts on others. Those who lie, especially about God, reveal their corrupt state and alliance to Satan (John 8:44). Solomon wrote, "Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, but those who deal faithfully are His delight" (Prov 12:22), and "A lying tongue hates those it crushes, and a flattering mouth works ruin" (Prov 26:28). Those who lie stand in opposition to truth-tellers. Shemaiah, by attacking God's prophet, was actually attacking God Himself, and the Lord would not tolerate such rebellion. God's judgment fell upon Shemaiah, with the result that neither he, nor his descendants, would see the good that God was going to accomplish in the future concerning the liberation of His people (Jer 29:32a). This judgment came because Shemaiah had "preached rebellion against the LORD" (Jer 29:32b).

In this war of letters, each person was claiming to be a true prophet of God, who spoke His truth, and sought to influence those around them. Only Jeremiah passed the test of a true prophet in that all he said agreed with Scripture (Deut 13:1-5), and gave short term prophesy that came to pass in his lifetime (Jer 28:15-17), thus validating his long-term predictions (Deut 18:21-22). Jeremiah was faithful to speak God's words of truth, even though it was not popular or what people wanted to hear.

Present Application

As Christians living in America, we find ourselves living predominantly in a pagan nation, where the values of our leaders and the culture at large aligns more with Satan than God. It is in this pagan environment that God calls us to be lights to help others know the gospel of God's grace and to preach His Word faithfully, and this by various platforms. But there will always be false teachers who will tell others what they want to hear rather than the truth they need to hear. Truth tells it like it is. It states the facts of a matter. And the Bible is God's truth about Himself and all that is. It literally defines reality. It does not tell us everything about everything, but what

it does reveal is what God deems important for us to know, first about Himself, and then everything else it addresses. And God's Word provides us a reference point by which we can evaluate what we see, hear, or experience. And this enables us to discern God's truth from falsehood, and thus be equipped like good Bereans (Acts 17:11).

As Christian living in America, we face constant distractions and mounting pressures to turn away from the sure foundation of God's Word. And we must always be diligent to guard our minds from dangerous lies that come to us from various sources, whether through academic institutions, television, radio, music, literature, internet, or casual conversations with family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers. Sadly, many churches in America have failed to preach God's Word, and thus their congregants are spiritually dead at worst, or if saved, too malnourished and weak to stand against the increasing cultural pressures of our day. Any dead fish can float downstream, but we who are alive in Christ and strong in His Word must swim against the cultural currents. Christians who learn God's Word and live by faith are the movers and shakers in the spiritual realm where the battle truly rages (Eph 6:12). Much of the moral decay we see in American culture—whether political, academic, social, or economic—merely reflects the symptoms of spiritual sickness that plagues our nation. But we are not helpless to speak against corrupt cultural norms, nor against those who promote enslaving lies. As Christians, we stand with God, and we stand on the truth of His Word.

As Christians living in America, we know there is no greater threat to political, social, or economic tyranny than the preaching of the free grace gospel and the consistent and accurate teaching of God's Word. We know every form of freedom will predominate where the gospel is received and converted hearts are in submission to God and His Word. Tyrants cannot rise or flourish in a healthy spiritual climate. However, the opposite is true. Where the gospel of grace is rejected, and God's Word finds no fertile soil, there the enemy will plant his foot, and the cultural perversions that come to mark a society will rise higher and higher until heaven itself can extend no more grace, and then God's wrath will fall hard upon those who pursue evil, much as it fell on Sodom and Gomorrah, or upon His own people, Israel, when they turned from Him and pursued the evil ways of the world. As God's servants, may we be faithful to preach His gospel of grace, pray constantly, and share His Word where open hearts will receive it. And maybe, just maybe, He will spare our nation from the judgment that will surely come upon us if we fail to turn back to Him. *Dear Lord, strengthen us for the days ahead, that we may walk faithfully with You, and be a light in a dark world.*

