

Title: "Is God For Us or Against Us?"

Text: Jeremiah 25:1-14; Hebrews 12:1-11

My friends, we are now going to enter into a final phase of our sermon series on "Living Faith in 3D."

- Last week we finished Hebrews 11, which we were using as a guide to see what Living Faith actually looked like in the lives of a variety of people in the Old Testament.
- And the writer took us all the way from Abel, the son of Adam and Eve back in Genesis 4 right through Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
 - Moses at the time of the Exodus,
 - and Joshua at the entrance to the Promised Land.
- Last week he gave us a summary statement about the time of the Judges, the Kings and prophets.

It's pretty much the whole Old Testament that was covered.

- But there is one last phase of Israel's history that was only alluded to: the time of the Exile.
- It was alluded to when the writer spoke of some who by faith quenched the fury of flames and shut the mouths of lions.
- That happened in the life of Daniel, while in Exile in Babylon.

In this last phase of our sermon series, I'd like us to spend some time on this period of the exile.

- It raises a whole series of questions that are very relevant for anyone in any age who is seeking to live out a life of faith in this broken world.
- Not the least of which is the question: "Is God for us or against us in this life?"

Listen today to what God says to His people about the coming time of their exile in Jeremiah 25:1-14.

My friends, we are still unpacking Paul's prayer in Ephesians that we "grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of Christ is."

- Maturing in "living faith" is still about grasping that love.
- The question "in exile" is: How do we grasp the love of God when "worse turns to worst" in our lives?

-How do we keep on trusting in God's love when it seems that it is God Himself who has turned against us?

Exile was an experience for the Israelites when it seemed that God had actually turned against them.

- God told them through Jeremiah that He was bringing judgment on their sin by sending the Babylonians to destroy their land, their cities, and the Temple.
- And that's exactly what happened in 605BC.

The Babylonians came and besieged Jerusalem, capturing the city and carting off thousands of Jews into captivity in Babylon.

- They allowed a series of puppet kings to continue to rule on the throne of David in Jerusalem,
- but when they continued to be rebellious, Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon came back with his army and destroyed Jerusalem and leveled it including the Temple.

More Jews were carted off into captivity, and the Israelites became "aliens and strangers in a foreign land."

- And they were not residents in an alien land because they had chosen to travel, or were fleeing oppression, or were seeking a better opportunity for work.
- They were aliens in the foreign land because God had cast them out of the Land of Promise.

They were being punished. Punished for their own sins.

"Because you have continually disobeyed my words of correction to you," the Lord says through Jeremiah.

"Because you have consistently ignored my warnings to you about what would happen,

-I am now going to bring Nebuchadnezzar against you and you will become an object of scorn."

So was God "for them or against them" in this phase of Israel's life?

- And what do God's people do when it seems that God Himself has turned against them?
- Have you ever felt like God has turned against you?
- Have you ever felt like your sins have caused God to punish you?

Well there are a few things I'd like us to pay attention to,
-both in this passage from Jeremiah, and from our earlier
Scripture reading from Hebrews 12 today.

1. First, in Hebrews 12, the writer speaks of God
"disciplining those He loves."

In fact, he says, God's corrective discipline in a person's life is
a sure sign that the person really is a beloved child of God.
-He says, "If you are not ever disciplined by God, then you
are illegitimate!"

Perhaps you never thought about it like this,
-but God doesn't discipline His people because He hates
them, but because he loves them.
-It is corrective discipline with the purpose of maturing the
child, helping the child learn right from wrong, nurturing
the child's soul so they don't end up as a self-
centered, egotistical tyrant.

And such discipline, the writer says, is unpleasant for both
father and the child, but it is beneficial.
-The good father's goal is the child's growth and maturity.

And my friends, God uses suffering in all of our lives towards
these ends all the time.
-In fact, it is often through times of suffering that we grow up
more than at any other time in our lives.
-It is often through times of suffering that we also come to
experience and appreciate God's love more deeply than
ever before.

2. Secondly, do we see this in this passage from Jeremiah?

-At first blush, it doesn't sound like God is being very loving in
this passage as he tells His people that He is bringing His
servant Nebuchadnezzar to pulverize their nation.

-But notice that God is actually speaking to His people here.
-I don't want you to miss that.
-God is actually speaking to His people here, and He is
telling them what He is doing and why He is doing it.

This is because God loves them, and is actually for them.
-He wants them to know that He is about to discipline them,
and he wants them to know why it is going to happen.
-He also wants them to know what the discipline is going to
look like, and even how long it is going to last.

These are actually the signs of good parenting.

So even though God is about to punish his rebellious children,
-he is not hating them.
-He is not against them.
No, He is speaking to them.
-He is putting the discipline into context so they will know
what is happening and why.

Speaking to His people is a sign that they are still God's
people.
-He is not abandoning them, but is somehow still loving
them even though He is about to discipline them.

And notice, too, that He tells them not only how long the
punishment of being sent into exile is going to last,
-but that at the end of the period He is also going to call the
nation of Babylon to account for their guilt as well.

And what is their guilt about?
-Well, elsewhere in Jeremiah chapter 50, God tells the
Babylonians that He is going to punish them for the severity
of the way they treated His people.
-You see, God may have called Nebuchadnezzar to inflict
punishment on His people,
-but God had not called Nebuchadnezzar to slaughter
women and children, and dash babies' heads against
stones,
-and torture soldiers, and take delight in all manner of
evil.

The Babylonians went above and beyond the punishment that
God had meant to be meted out.
-And God says to His people, "Vengeance will be mine. I
will repay," says the Lord.

You see, even in this, God is still looking out for His people.
-He is not against them, but always and forever for them,
-even when he is disciplining them.

3. And finally, I want you to hear the letter that God asks
Jeremiah to write to His people after they have been
carted off into Exile.

The punishment has been meted out; the Israelites are living
as strangers and aliens in the land of Babylon,
-and in chapter 29 of Jeremiah, God says to His people:

“This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.’”

Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says, “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. 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. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the Lord, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

Do you hear the love with which God speaks to His people?
Do you hear the hope that He is giving to them?
Do you hear how God takes responsibility for them being in
exile?

-Telling them that He was the one who carried them there,
even though it was the Babylonians who did it.

But do you hear how he gives them a future and a hope by telling them that He who carried them there will also be the One to bring them home when the punishment is complete?

His goal and purpose has never been to harm them, but to form them and shape them and mature them,
-and draw them into a wider, longer, higher, deeper relationship with Him,
-so that they would truly be His people, and He would truly be their God.

Is God for them or against them in all of this?
-He is always for them, and is working all things together for their good, even corrective discipline.

And isn't it amazing how God even tells them how He is calling them to live while they are in exile?
-Build houses and settle down, you are going to be there for 70 years.
-Marry and have sons and daughters, and when they grow up let them get married to one another.
-Be fruitful and multiply in the land I have carried you off to.
-Increase in number, do not decrease.
-And also, seek the prosperity of the city in which you live.
-Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you will prosper, too.

My friends, over the next few weeks, we are going to look at what a living faith looked like while lived in exile.
-We are going to explore a little of the lives of Ezekiel, Daniel, Esther, and Nehemiah.
-These were men and women who spent those 70 years in Babylon seeking to obey these words of God spoken through Jeremiah.

They sought and prayed for the prosperity of the land in which they now lived.
-They wrestled to figure out how to live in that foreign land and yet be faithful to their own faith and heritage.

- They wrestled to figure out how to grasp how wide and long and high and deep the love of God was,
 - even while they knew they were being disciplined for their sin.
- They sought to maintain their faith in God, even when the culture around them was hostile to that faith.

There is much we can learn from them in the weeks to come.

But for today, if you have ever wondered whether God is actually for you or against you, know this:

“God actually so loved the world, that He sent his one and only Son into the world, that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have everlasting life. He did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might have life.”

- Do you know that even though you and I have all sinned just like the Israelites did,
- and even though we are just as much deserving of punishment as they ever were,
 - God has gone to great lengths to bear that punishment on Himself?

That is what God’s Son Jesus was doing on the cross on Good Friday.

- He was bearing the punishment that we all deserved for us.
 - And He did that as an atoning sacrifice so that we might not ever have to be exiled from God’s presence again.

So even if you have sinned and feel guilty.

- Even if you are thinking that God has every reason in the world to want to punish you.
- Even if you think you deserve to be banished from his sight.

All He now wants is for you and me to acknowledge that sin, and repent of it, and ask forgiveness.

All He wants is for us to trust in the atoning sacrifice that His Son has made for us.

All He wants is for us to receive His grace, and allow ourselves to be washed clean.

This is the good news of the gospel.

-In Christ Jesus, our sins get washed away.

-Our punishment is fulfilled.

-Our exile is over.

-We can come home to the Father again.

That's what we will proclaim and enact again at the Lord's
Table in just a minute.

For now, let's pray.