



THE STORY



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Scripture: *The Story* - Chapter 17 - Fall of Judah

Job benefits. Do you get Job benefits? For some it may include group insurance for things like health, dental, vision care, life insurance or retirement benefits. Some companies even provide for some daycare, sick leave, paid vacation as well as flexible work schedules.

My daughter was an assistant manager at a well-known clothing company and a perk she received was up to 50 % off her purchases. You can imagine what we all got for Christmas from her for a few years. When my oldest sister was a student, she got a summer job at Weston's bakery in Kitchener. Every Friday, employees could purchase baked goods for half price. Fridays were a glorious time in our home during that summer.

Perhaps you have had a job that amidst the daily drudgery, there were some perks, almost made the grind worthwhile. I went online to find out the companies that give the best benefits to their employees. Here are a few examples if you are looking for a job.

Airbnb, gives its employees an annual stipend of \$2,000 to travel and stay in an Airbnb listing anywhere in the world.

Burton (snowboarding apparel) employees receive season ski passes and "snow days" to hit the slopes after a big snowfall.

In-N-Out Burger employees can treat themselves to a free Double-Double Burger and fries during each shift. And once you are done working at In-N-Out Burger, you may want to consider a job at:

Microsoft because they offer an annual \$800 "StayFit" reimbursement program to employees, to help cover the cost of gym memberships and fitness programs.

Facebook provides \$4,000 in "Baby Cash" to employees with a newborn.

And Finally,

Timberland (outdoor footwear) gives its employees up to 40 hours of paid time off per year to volunteer in the community.

Some of your job perks or benefits may not be as generous or extravagant as these but any little incentive helps to keep an employee motivated to complete their task to the best of their ability. Would you agree?

My perks as the Teaching Pastor at North Park are almost too generous to describe. It's an embarrassment of riches. A competitive salary and benefit package. I am surrounded by a Stellar Staff Team led by the incomparable Matt Eckert. North Park Church located on the scenic vista of beautiful North East London. And I have all of you. What more could a person ask for.

But have you ever had a job with no perks? No incentives. It was a daily struggle just getting out of bed in the morning and clock in. Putting in your eight hours with no thanks, no encouragement, no positive reinforcement of any kind. Some of you know that feeling. Let me ask you a question, how long did you last? Because that is a tough gig? And that is where we find ourselves today, in *The Story*.

If you are just joining with us at North Park. We are a little over halfway through a message series we started last September. With the exception of small breaks at Christmas and Easter, it is a journey that will take us 31 weeks, from September 2017 all the way through to June 2018 and every age group and

ministry area at North Park is involved in this adventure. We are studying, *The Story*. God's plan and purpose for humanity, and the world. And we are using as our resource, the book called, *The Story*, Genesis right through to Revelation is contained in this book. Arranged in chronological order it sets out God's story, what we have been calling the "*Upper Story*" and then our place in it, referred to as the "*Lower Story*". Let me just take a moment to review where we find ourselves today.

Do you remember in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth and his crowning achievement, humanity? His desire was to be in relationship with us. Alas, Adam and Eve rebelled against this vision and sin enters the world. But almost immediately God sets a plan in motion to bring his people back to him. Through Abraham, he promised to build a nation, Israel that would be a blessing to the world. Throughout the ensuing years, there is this up and down relationship between God and his people. The Israelites turn to other gods, idolatry, get themselves into trouble, call out to God, he saves them. They follow him for a little while but then they go back to the same routine, time after time, century after century.

Oh, Israel has some good times. Under the leadership of King David, the Kingdom of Israel is cohesive and strong and things look good for a while but this faithfulness is not passed down. Only one generation later, the Kingdom splits into two due to the apathy of the people towards God. Each kingdom is led by a succession of mostly bad kings. God sends prophets or messengers, like Amos and Isaiah to the people to implore them to turn from their ways and turn back to God, but to no avail. In 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and in 586 BC, the Southern Kingdom of Judah falls to the Babylonians. This is how we get to,

2 Chronicles 36:15-16 or page 241

The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; ¹⁶ but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose

against His people, until there was no remedy.

There was no remedy. Those are pretty hopeless words aren't they. How would you like to hear those words if you went to the doctor? Almost four years ago, I got a call in London, from Carolyn, who was in Waterloo. My dad had suffered a brain aneurysm and there was little hope for survival. I made the hour drive to the hospital preparing myself for the worst. When I got to my dad's bedside and talked to him and stroked his arm, he stuck his tongue out at me, which was so like my dad. I turned to the doctor and said, *did you see that!* The doctor gently explained to me that there was purely reflex and that my dad was dying. There was no remedy. Those are hard words to hear. From a doctor or maybe from your mechanic about a car problem but can you imagine hearing them from God?! There is no remedy.

The people of God, the Israelites, first split in two because of their disobedience and now the northern Kingdom of Israel has been conquered by the Assyrians. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, by the Babylonians and the people are in exile, separated from God. There is no remedy! Things appear hopeless. But how can that be? Didn't God make some promises to his people? That he would be their God and they would be his people. He promised Abraham that the nation of Israel would be a great nation and he would bless it and use it to be a blessing to all the other nations of the world. Have those promises all ended here, with these words, *there is no remedy?*

This is what we have to remember with God and this is an important concept for us to grasp. Even though there is no remedy, it doesn't mean that God does not have a plan. *We are never without hope because God is never without a plan.*

And that leads us to Jeremiah. Are you familiar with Jeremiah in the bible? ***Shout out anything you know about him.*** Jeremiah was the son of a priest and was thought to have been born around 645 BC. He was from a small village located just outside of Jerusalem. Jeremiah was a prophet handpicked by God.

This is Jeremiah speaking. It says,

The word of the LORD came to me, saying,

⁵ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

Long before Jeremiah was even born, God knew him and had a special plan and assignment for his life. He was a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah for over 40 years. He prophesied through the reign of five Kings and he continue to speak God’s word to the people even during the time when the Babylonians invaded. Even when they destroyed Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple of the Lord. These were desperate, hopeless times.

It was against this backdrop that Jeremiah was appointed to speak to the people for the Lord. Do you know the message God ask him to share? *Jeremiah, I want you to expose some of the persist sins of the people, their pride, idolatry, adultery, lying, mistreatment of the poor. And then tell them that they need to return to me. If they don’t there will be dire consequences. In your next conversation with the people, try and sneak those ones into the mix.* How would you like that for a job?!

Are you in a job where you usually only deliver bad news? Like a Dentist. I feel badly for dentists because let’s face it, who really likes going to the Dentist. I have a great dentist. Nice guy, he sings and genuinely looks like he loves what he does. But when I glanced over my weekly schedule and saw that next week I have a “Dentist Appointment”, I groaned audibly. Again, no offense to any Dentists. We need you but we just don’t like our mouths treated like a mining expedition. Cavity, needle, root canal and extraction, these are not words that bring comfort to the human spirit.

Jeremiah was called by God to deliver some tough words to the people, during a pretty difficult time so you can image, he was not received with open arms either. The welcome mat was not rolled out when people saw Jeremiah approaching.

In fact, he was seen by the people as a bit of a downer because all he ever did was hold them accountable for the way they were living, which just happened to be contrary to the ways of God.

But, for over 40 years, Jeremiah remained faithful to the task at hand. To say whatever the Lord asked him to say to his people. Forty years, faithfully clocking in and out each day.

The daily grind. Without receiving any perks. There didn’t seem to be any benefits, no words of encouragement, no thank you’s, no *hey buddy, it is tough job but you are doing well. Hang in there.*

Instead, he was met with hostility and death threats. He was beaten and abused. He was mocked and even lowered into an empty cistern in hopes that he would starve to death there.

Jeremiah 12:6, God says to him;

Your relatives, members of your own family - even they have betrayed you; they have raised a loud cry against you. Do not trust them, though they speak well of you.

In *Jeremiah 16:1*, God even forbid Jeremiah to marry or have children. Jeremiah, a lonely, mistreated and misunderstood prophet of God. Yet, this was his quandary. Look at what he says in

Jeremiah 20:9

But if I say, “I will not mention his word or speak anymore in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

Jeremiah couldn’t hold in the words of God even if he wanted to. They were like a fire burning in his chest. He had to let it out!

Has that ever happened to you? You know that you have to say something, even if you are not sure how well it will be received. It is just burning in you and it has to come out. How did that work out for you?

When my boys were younger, I used to help coach one of my son’s hockey teams. Hockey is an emotional sport have you noticed. There are times

when the coach may just have a different interpretation of a rule than the referee. Now for the most part, I was usually able to adjust to their obvious miscalls. But one time, this one time, I had a fire burning in my chest. I had to let it out. I patiently and respectfully, I thought, explained to the referee just how I felt about a call he had made against our team. I couldn't help it! The words were burning in me. When one of our players, had to go and serve a two-minute penalty for my burning fire, I realized that those words were not received well. Perhaps, those words weren't from God.

In *Jeremiah 15: 20-21*, page 238 of *The Story*, God tells Jeremiah, that if he would boldly speak His words and not shrink back in fear of the people, then he says,

*I will make you a wall to this people,
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you
but will not overcome you,
for I am with you
to rescue and save you,"
declares the LORD.
21 "I will save you from the hands of the
wicked and deliver you from the grasp of the
cruel."*

Make no mistake about it, God was calling Jeremiah to a difficult task. There may not be a lot of earthly benefits or perks. It would be lonely, he would take some abuse and he will be misunderstood, but God promises, he will give him the words and he will protect him. Because, even though there appears to be no remedy for the people, it doesn't mean that God does not have a plan.

We are never without hope because God is never without a plan.

If I were to ask you to tell me the longest book in the bible, what would you say? Many of you might respond, Psalms. Although Psalms has the most chapters, 150, it is not the longest in terms of word count. That honour goes to, anyone? It is the book of Jeremiah, which contains over 33 000 words. Of all of those words, these 29 may be the most well-known, not just in Jeremiah but in the whole bible.

Jeremiah 29:11

*"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."*

Have you heard those words before? They were written by Jeremiah, the misunderstood and mistreated one, in a letter to those Israelites who have been taken away forcibly from their homeland by the Babylonians. They are in exile in a foreign land. Separated from God. The worst case scenario has finally happened to them. God warned them for generations and finally he has turned them over to the enemy and Jeremiah gives them 29 words that offer them hope in their predicament. That God has not forgotten them. There was no remedy but there is a plan. God has a plan.

A plan to prosper and not to harm the people, a plan to give them a hope and a future. *Jeremiah 29:11*. This is one of the most repeated passages in the bible, right up there with *John 3:16*, (for God so loved..) *Proverbs 3:5-6*. (Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not...)

Check out the cards in a Christian book store and you are sure to find this verse splashed across the front of some of them, especially for something like a graduation or a new job. Check out any Christian Jewelry and I am sure this passage is etched on something. Check out a tattoo and chances are that this one, is inked on more than a few Christian's arms or legs.

It is so hope filled. It reminds us that in the midst of the pain and sin of our world, there is a better day coming where we will prosper.

But the only problem with this verse, is that it is also one of the most misunderstood and misused passages in the whole bible because we often use it as a security blanket. God has a plan for me which is good, so clearly this suffering or pain I am going through right now will end soon and then let the prospering begin. Bring it on! But that is not at all what God was promising the Israelites in the midst of their despair and it is not what he promises us, either.

The heart of this verse is not that we escape our lot in life but that we would learn to thrive in the midst of, and even in spite of it.

Again, let me remind you of the context of why Jeremiah wrote these words. The Israelites are in exile in a foreign land, the enemy land, Babylon. Taken there are prisoners. It is a punishment as a result of their constant disobedience of God. Jeremiah is actually speaking these words to combat the lies that false prophets have been spreading that God would rescue the people quickly.

Oh Jeremiah says, God does have a plan. It's a good plan. That will offer a hopeful and prosperous future. But it's going to take a little longer than the people expected or desired.

See, *Jeremiah 29:11*, has to be read in light of what comes before it, to be truly understood. Look at what Jeremiah writes in,

Jeremiah 29:10.

This is what the LORD 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.

There is a plan for the Israelites to prosper, it is just going to take 70 years. What?!

This is not what the Israelites wanted to hear! They wanted to be told that God was going to spring them from their self-imposed dilemma, pronto. They wanted to hear that they were going home, ASAP. That their suffering was going to end. Instead God's plan had them staying right where they were, for 70 years. God said that his plan to prosper and give hope and a future to his people first had to go through a 70 years refining period. This would have been crushing for the Israelites to hear because 70 years was basically a generation in this day. For almost all of the people that Jeremiah was addressing with these words, that meant that for the rest of their life time they would be in captivity in the land of their enemies, in exile. Away from their homeland, away from all that was familiar. These promises of a hope filled and better future would not happen in their life time. This would have been a bitter pill to swallow. Can you imagine?

Some of you can. You've been there. In exile. Maybe you are there right now. A little over a year ago, Marlene Sladek was living the good life with her husband Gus. She was a loving mother of four and a doting grandmother of eight. Life was generally good. She was still relatively young, 73 and active. Then came the pain and a visit to the doctor's office and the diagnosis was not good. Stomach Cancer. The treatments started. Marlene didn't want to die. She still had so much to live for. She and her family were praying for a miracle, that she would be healed. Take it away, God. When she went for her chemo treatments she used to tell them, *give me the best you've got!*

Last Thursday, January 25 a little over a year after she was first diagnosed, Marlene at the age of 74 died of cancer. Hard to understand isn't it. Many of you have walked the same journey with a loved one. This past year, was a year of exile for Marlene, her husband Gus and their family. Not from God, he was there all the time and he had a plan. Her body was held hostage by the disease, she was in exile from all that was familiar to her, her normal healthy life. But, do you want to know what Marlene did while she was in exile? She settled in and turned to God. Even though she didn't like her predicament, she trusted and rested in Jesus. Four of her children shared memories at her funeral and each one of them said that they only saw Marlene's faith grow stronger in the last year. They stated that the illness actually drew their parents closer together as each day, they surrendered their fears and concerns to God. Gus and Marlene walked through this exile together and their bond grew stronger.

The family even shared how Marlene brightened the spirits of many of the patients and nurses at the Cancer clinic with words of hope and encouragement each time she had a treatment. God used her in the midst of her exile.

Now, none of this means it was easy or that Marlene, Gus and their family did not grieve or have feelings of hurt or pain or even anger. They did, but they took those feelings to God. He met them in their despair. He had a plan. A plan to prosper Marlene and to give her a future. But, she died. There was no remedy.

Can I take a moment to talk about death? I actually think this is an area I might know a little bit about. Death is almost a weekly occurrence in my life. This past week, I officiated at two funerals. I spent time at the hospital praying with a family in the final hours of their father's life.

I watched my own dad's heart monitor flat line as he took his last breath and not a day goes by when I don't think of him or long to hear his voice again.

But the truth is, that death is inevitable for each of us in this room. How is that for being the bearer of bad news? I feel a little like Jeremiah. When God first created humanity, he never intended for us to die. Death, our physical death is part of the repercussions of sin. This side of heaven or Jesus returning in our lifetime, we are all going to die. And that is hard for us, because, we love our family, we miss them.

We can't imagine life without them. But this is where we can be a little short sighted if we are Christians. This earthly life we have, whether it is 20 years or 50 years or 75 years or 100 years, it is but a dress rehearsal for the life that is to come with Jesus. This, we have here, it is but a blink of an eye compared to all eternity that we will have in heaven.

Jeremiah 29:11

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.

There is a great hope and future for those who have accepted Jesus as Lord of their life. There will be a time of prosperity, but it may not be here, on earth. You may, in fact you almost certainly will go through times of trials and difficulty, sickness and despair. Why? Look at,

Romans 5:3-5

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope.

⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

God is not in the happiness business. He is in the character building business. He is in the hope building business and he is preparing his people for something far greater than what we have on earth. He is preparing us for eternity with Him. What a future! But there may be some bumps on the road along the way.

The truth is, we are all in exile. Do you know that? If you identify yourself as a Christian here today, you are in a foreign land. This earth is not your home. Now, Paul, you are starting to sound eerie.

Philippians 3:20, the Apostle Paul says that,

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ,

Our citizenship is in heaven, we are in a foreign land here in London, so what are we supposed to do? Hunkered down in the church with our own kind until Jesus comes? No, we are to do the same thing that Jeremiah told the Israelites to do, while they were in Babylon. He says, settle in! You may be here for awhile!

Look back at Jeremiah 29, before verse 11, Jeremiah says to the people. Just listen to these words,

Jeremiah 29:4-7

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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."

Now listen to *Verses 10-11*, in light of what we just read.

¹⁰ This is what the LORD 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. ¹¹ 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.

Jeremiah, the bearer of bad news, the prophet with the thankless job without benefits. Earthly benefits that is. He actually came proclaiming the greatest benefit of all, eternal life, prosperous life with a future and a hope that is available through Jesus. But many scoffed at him, many turned a deaf ear to him, will we? Will you?

Do you know that his call to the Israelites remains the same for us today? While we are in exile, whatever that is for us. Maybe it's a physical location. In our neighbourhoods. But Paul, I have no other Christians that live around me. But Paul, I have no other Christians in my workplace. But Paul, I have no other Christians at my school.

Do not run from that, settle in and pray for ways that God can use you can bring his peace and prosperity to those environments. Maybe it is in your circumstances you feel like you are in exile. You have a lousy job or no job, but you have Jesus. You have poor health, but you have Jesus. You are lonely or sick, but you have Jesus. Some days, it's a fight just to get out of bed, but you have Jesus.

If we have Jesus and nothing else, we are never without hope because God is never without a plan. His call is that we settle in and pray for God to bring His peace and prosperity into our circumstances.

You may feel like Jeremiah some of the time. Misunderstood and mistreated, like you are undertaking a thankless mission. But may you always remember that *we are never without hope because God is never without a plan.*

Jeremiah 29:11

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.

He has given us a hope and a future when we turn to Him. Is that what you are doing today-turning to God? Even if you feel like you are in exile, He is there and has a plan and a great future for our lives.

Amen? Amen.

Points to Ponder

THE STORY

The Kingdoms' Fall

Chapter 17

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. What are the best perks or benefits you have received in a job? What about times when you worked a thankless job, how did it affect your attitude and work ethic?
2. *There is no remedy.* Have you ever been told that there seems to be no hope? What was the circumstance and how did you process it?
3. *We are never without hope because God is never without a plan.* Have you found this to be true in your life? Describe a time when you felt like things were hopeless but realized that God was at work through the circumstance.
4. Have you ever had to be the bearer of bad news? How did it go over? Put yourself in Jeremiah's shoes. Talk about what it must have been like to only bring bad news to the Israelites.
5. Do you feel like you are in exile, today? What will it mean for you to settle in and seek the peace and prosperity of God in your situation?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically for those in your group who may feel like they are in exile. Pray for God's peace and prosperity that gives them a hope and a future.