

### **Introduction:**

This morning, we open prayer week by focusing on strengthening the practice of prayer in our lives as a church. When I want to stir my heart towards prayer, I often turn to the nineteenth-century pastor E.M. Bounds. Listen to how he speaks of prayer. Bounds says, “Prayer is the greatest of all forces, because it honors God and brings him into active aid.” “God is waiting to be put to the test by His people in prayer. He delights in being put to the test on His promises. It is His highest pleasure to answer prayer, to prove the reliability of His promises.” “Prayer is far-reaching in its influence and worldwide in its effects. It affects all men, affects them everywhere, and affects them in all things. It touches man's interest in time and eternity. It lays hold upon God and moves Him to interfere in the affairs of earth. It moves the angels to minister to men in this life. It restrains and defeats the devil in his schemes to ruin man. Prayer goes everywhere and lays its hand upon everything.” Church, our highest calling is to desire the Lord to fulfill His purposes on earth, and prayer is one of the primary ways God advances His purposes. Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:9-10). God, in His sovereignty, has chosen to bind His work in our world to prayer, therefore, prayer is not peripheral to faith; it is faith breathing. It is how we—as strangers and exiles in this world—find hope and discover that God is nearer than we’ve imagined. To set our hearts on these truths, I want to consider the role Jeremiah 29:1-14 reveals prayer played during a pivotal time in the history of God’s people. Let’s see the context first in verses 1-3, “These are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. This was after King Jeconiah and the queen mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen, and the metal workers had departed from Jerusalem. 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.” Pause there. This tells us we’re coming to a letter sent by Jeremiah to God’s people during the Babylonian exile. But why did Jeremiah write this letter? Look at verses 8-10, “For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the Lord. For thus says the Lord: ‘When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.’” In Jeremiah 25, Jeremiah prophesied of the coming Babylonian exile as God’s judgment for Israel’s sin and declared it would last for seventy years. Yet, after being taken into exile, prophets and diviners falsely claimed Babylon would fall sooner than the Lord had promised. Jeremiah sends this letter to keep God’s people from believing those lies and call them to live faithfully while they wait for the completion of God’s judgment. So, the words we will read are encouragements to people in desperation, whose world had been torn apart and were being tempted by false hope, to call them to trust in the Word of the Lord. I want to consider the focus of Jeremiah’s dual calls in this letter’s opening. First, in verses 3-7, Jeremiah calls them to,

### **Seek The Lord’s Mercy through Prayer**

As we read these verses, consider how those who first read them must have felt. Look at verses 3-7, “The letter... said: ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But 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 find your welfare.’” The word from the Lord begins with a reminder that their captivity is under God’s sovereign control. He sent them into exile.

Next comes the call to live faithful lives in Babylon, building homes and increasing their families while they wait for God's deliverance. The language of multiplication and increase echoes the exodus and points to God's goodness. This all sounds good until God charges them to seek the betterment of Babylon and pray for its welfare because its prosperity will mean their own. Consider what this means. They shouldn't gripe and complain, nor pass their days in discouragement and disdain, but live peaceful lives, praying for God's mercy to extend even to their enemies. How difficult must this have been to hear? As Christopher Wright points out, "It was probably hard enough for the exiles to imagine that they could pray to YHWH in Babylon, let alone that they should pray to him for Babylon. It must have seemed impossible, theologically, emotionally and politically. But Jeremiah insists that this is the task before them." (Christopher Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah: Grace in the End*, p. 293). God's call in their desperation and darkness was to seek His mercy through prayer for themselves and the Babylonians. Second, in verses 11-14, Jeremiah calls them to,

### **Desire the Lord's Presence in Prayer**

After telling them to reject false prophecies and reminding them of God's Word, Jeremiah gives what may be the most quoted and claimed promise in Scripture. Look at verses 11-14, "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. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear 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 I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." God declares that His plans for them, including their captivity, are for their good and designed to give them hope. What is that hope in? He tells them, "When you are delivered, you will pray to me and I will hear you. You will seek me and I will be found." Do you see what God is ultimately holding out to them? His presence. Church, God's supreme will is to be known by His people. In Israel's darkness, He calls them to pray for His sustaining mercy. And in their deliverance, He calls them to pray for His satisfying presence. On either side, prayer is commanded because it leans on the Lord as the source of all good things. Now, whenever we read passages like these in the Old Testament, we must remember they are written to a specific people. These promises were given to the exiles in Babylon. How do we know if they apply to us in any way? And if they do, how can we apply them? I believe the answer lies in 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 and Romans 15:1-4. Turn with me first to 1 Corinthians 10. Paul is warning believers of idolatry, and, after reminding them of the Israelites who died in the wilderness due to idolatry in verses 1-10, note what he says in verse 11, "Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction." The purpose of recording that story is for our instruction. Turn now to Romans 15. In Romans 15, Paul encourages believers to bear with each other's weaknesses, not seeking to please ourselves but to build up our neighbors. Look at verses 3-4, "For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.' For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." While giving Christ's example, Paul quotes Psalm 69:9 and says that was written to instruct and encourage us. Note his phrasing, "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction." The role of anything written in the Old Testament is to give us instruction. Now, pay attention to the purpose at the end of verse 4. This instruction is to give us hope-filled endurance. So, everything we read in the Old Testament is for us as well as for those who first heard it. While these promises and instructions have specific applications to the exiles in Babylon, they provide us with instructions to encourage hope-filled endurance. So, here is what we should ask, how does this passage instruct us and encourage hope-filled endurance? I see five ways it instructs and encourages us. First, it shows us how,

### **1) Prayer Sustains Us in All Circumstances**

Notice how in exile and deliverance God's people were called to pray. In verse 7, they are called to "pray to the Lord" on behalf of Babylon for God's mercy in their exile. And in verse 12, they are told that in their deliverance, they will "come and pray" to the Lord.

In the darkness of exile and the beauty of deliverance, the call remained the same. Pray to the Lord. Family, prayer is not simply a tool to remove burdens, it is what sustains your faith in dark seasons and in prosperity. Second, this passage encourages us to,

## **2) Make Specific Requests of God**

I am persuaded this is the most important thing to learn about prayer in our context. Look again at verse 7. God says, “seek the welfare of the city...and pray to the Lord on its behalf.” God doesn’t call them to vague prayers; He tells them to ask for something specific. Ask Him to bless Babylon. I believe we often fail to receive answers to prayer because we don’t ask for specific things. I was deeply challenged by my brothers and sisters in Abu Dhabi who would pray for everything on their hearts. Their prayers exposed how shallow mine were, because I wasn’t bold enough to make specific requests of God. When I began to boldly ask for specific things, I started to see God’s power move in mighty ways. Family, make specific requests of God and see how often He answers prayer. Third, this passage teaches us to,

## **3) Pray for Things God Calls Us to Pray For**

Think about the call in exile. God called them to pray for something they would not have naturally been inclined to pray for, the welfare of Babylon. The truth is our hearts are not naturally inclined to ask for God’s purposes and our prayers need to be infused with God’s will. Last week, we considered the power and purpose of God’s Word to discern the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. As it does that, it shapes your prayers. One of the most helpful things for my prayer life has been to use Scripture to shape my requests. Sometimes, this looks like praying the exact words of a psalm or the Lord’s prayer with a desire to align my heart to those words. Other times, it involves taking a call from Scripture and turning it into a prayer. This is why we put scripture beside each way to pray in our prayer week guide. Family, challenge your heart to pray for things God calls you to pray for. Fourth, this passage reminds us,

## **4) God Will Hear and Provide**

Though God is speaking to a specific people, the promise He gives to them stands for all who are in Christ. Look again at verses 12-14, “you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear 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 I will restore your fortunes.” I am persuaded this promise applies to us because it is a common refrain to God’s people. And our trust in Christ makes us God’s people. Isaiah 55:6 says, “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.” Hebrews 4:14-16 says, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession....Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of Grace, that we may receive mercy and find help in time of need.” James 4:8 says, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” The gospel not only holds out the promise of forgiveness for sin, but, if we have been washed by the blood of Jesus, we can confidently draw near to God, knowing He hears our prayers and will provide. So family, let these promises sing to your heart and lead you to pray. Finally, this passage shows us,

## **5) God’s Presence is the Greatest Reward**

One of the greatest needs I see for the church today is to adjust our understanding of God’s blessing. We are conditioned to equate blessings only with things in this world. We have been trained to think God’s blessing only involves things like church growth, family and friendships thriving, satisfaction in work, peace and prosperity, and the list could go on. Yet, if you travel the world and peer into church history, you will discover some of the most satisfied people lived and live in some of the most trying situations. This is because their reward is not tied to any of the things we think. Look again at verse 13, “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.” God’s people were under judgment because they stopped seeking the Lord and His judgement was designed to draw them back to Himself as the fountain of living waters. Throughout redemptive history, the Lord constantly says His presence is our highest good. Consider what Jesus says after teaching the disciples to pray in Luke 11:9-13, “I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" We unpacked this passage two years ago. If you want to go deeper, look for the sermon titled "Praying with Expectation" in the Culture of Grace series. Let me summarize what Jesus is teaching. Family, make requests of the Lord because you know God is far better than any earthly father who delights in giving his children good things. Yet, because God always gives us what is best, He will give us more of the Spirit because His presence is the highest reward. This means you can be confident that with any request, God will either give you what you are asking for or something far better. So, pray in all circumstances, make specific request of God, pray for things He calls you to pray for, know God will hear and provide, and see His presence as the greatest reward.

**Conclusion:**

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection and response, I want to conclude by pointing our hearts to communion because it reminds us of what secures our hope in answers to prayer. Scripture is clear that apart from Jesus' sacrifice, we are without hope. All only hope of reconciliation and favor from God is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. When we take communion, we remind our hearts that His blood was shed to secure our redemption and His body is given to sustain us like manna in the wilderness. Prepare for communion by speaking these truths to your heart. If you are wrestling with sin, confess it, knowing God will hear, forgive, and restore because of Christ's sacrifice. If you are waiting for answers to prayer, know God delights to give you good things because you are in Jesus. If you haven't placed your trust in Jesus, know He is your only hope and run to Him today. Dwell today on God's goodness, mercy, and grace through Jesus and prepare to proclaim the sufficiency of His death when we partake of the elements together. As you respond, you are invited to come and kneel before Him in humility or seek prayer from a member of our prayer team worshipping on the front rows with lanyards on. Let call upon the Lord together during this time. Pray with me.