

This guide is an invitation to follow Jesus with greater purpose and hope. It will help you to explore the scriptures and challenge you to live out your faith. Each week we'd love for you to think about how you relate: **Up** (with God), **In** (with church) and **Out** (with neighbors).



Weekly Questions:

- How is God getting my attention? For help, think about these areas:
- How are you living up with God?
- How are you living in community with other followers of Jesus?
- How are you living out on mission with your neighbors?
- What are you going to do about it?

From Garden to Garden: Conversation 3 Jeremiah 29:1-14

A Counterculture for the Common Good: Seeking Shalom in Exile In wrapping up Act 4 of our journey, we grapple with the deep complexities of the Dialogue with the Divine when our circumstances turn hostile, disruptive, or painful. In Jeremiah 29, the Israelites find themselves forcibly removed from their homeland by the Babylonian Empire, living as strangers in a foreign and oppressive kingdom. Their skilled workers and resources are being extracted to build the wealth and power of King Nebuchadnezzar. In the midst of this systemic heartbreak, the prophet Jeremiah delivers an entirely unexpected word from God: do not shrivel up, do not revolt in fury, and do not disengage. Instead, God commands them to build houses, plant gardens, adapt to the new soil, raise families, and actively seek and pray for the shalom—the peace, wholeness, and prosperity—of the hostile city where they are exiled. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be a counterculture for the common good, showing up faithfully to serve and seek the flourishing of our community, neighborhood, and city regardless of who holds institutional power or whether the cultural environment is comfortable. We are called to live not just *for* our neighbors, but truly *with* them.

- In what areas of your life—whether at work, in a specific relationship, or within the broader culture—do you currently feel like you are living in a state of "exile" or adversity?
- How does Jeremiah's instruction to "plant gardens" and invest in the peace of an enemy empire challenge your natural instincts when navigating an unfair or difficult environment?
- What is the practical difference between merely being "for" your neighbors in Ashland and actively choosing to live "with" them in shared spaces and mutual vulnerability?

The Sacred Image: Love as an Inventor Sustaining a life of faith during profound suffering requires us to confront the haunting questions of adversity without turning to a superficial prosperity gospel. When historic or personal trauma strikes—such as the harrowing realities of the 1994 Rwandan genocide documented by theologians Greg Jones and Célestin Musekura—it is natural to cry out in grief, questioning God's presence or wrestling with past failures. True kingdom resilience is beautifully illustrated by survivors like Maggy Barankitse, who, after witnessing unimaginable violence, chose love over retaliatory hatred and declared that "love made her an inventor." Through Maison Shalom (House of Peace), she invented a new future by building schools, hospitals, and even a swimming pool for baptisms on fields once marked by mass killings. To stand as a counterculture for

good means fiercely affirming that the image of God embedded in every single human being is infinitely greater than our deepest social, political, or ideological differences. We must actively refuse to banalize human life or treat others as disposable when friction arises.

- Maggy Barankitse testified that "love made her an inventor" in the wake of tragedy. Where is God inviting love to make you an "inventor" of hope or reconciliation within your current circle of friction?
- How do we guard our hearts against "banalizing" or writing off people who hold opposing political, social, or personal views, ensuring we still honor the sacred image of God within them?
- When have you experienced a moment where a shared commitment to love or human dignity bridged an otherwise insurmountable difference between you and someone else?

Hope and a Future: The Promise in a True Historical Context Jeremiah 29:11—"For I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"—is frequently stripped of its historical weight and utilized as a superficial get-out-of-jail-free card. In reality, God spoke these profound words to a traumatized people entering a mandatory, seventy-year season of captivity. The promise of ultimate restoration was intimately tethered to their long-term willingness to sacrificially bless their oppressors and care for the vulnerable over generations.

- How does reframing Jeremiah 29:11 within a seventy-year exile deepen your comfort when facing prolonged hardships that do not have immediate or easy resolutions?
- Reflecting on FBCA's history as a Civil War hospital where enemies found healing, what does it look like for you to prioritize your identity in Christ over political or social divisions today?
- Where do you need to actively lean into the promise that "exile is only a moment, but wholeness is your forever story" to find comfort in a current season of grief or transition?

Practice: Inventive Love & Seeking Love

To align with the covenant conversation of Jeremiah means dropping our defensive posture, choosing presence over withdrawal, and allowing love to make us creative stewards. Engage with God's transforming dialogue through these weekly rhythms:

- **The Counterculture Presence Check:** Identify a civic, workplace, or neighborhood space this week where you regularly encounter tension or disagree with the prevailing policies or views. Instead of avoiding the space or fueling toxic rhetoric, intentionally show up to listen, build a relational bridge, and pray secretly for the flourishing and peace of that environment.
- **Resisting the Banalization of Neighbors:** Think of an individual or group you are tempted to write off, label, or treat as trivial due to cultural or political differences. Actively disrupt that pattern this week by identifying three concrete ways the image of God is visible in them, and commit to speaking of them with absolute dignity and respect in your private conversations.
- **Planting Shade for the Future:** Look at a long-term challenge or area of brokenness in your family, neighborhood, or church community and ask, "How will love make me an inventor here?" Plant a generational seed—whether by initiating a thankless rhythm of service, investing in an interactive space for children, or quietly funding a localized relief effort—focusing entirely on long-term repair over immediate self-interest.
- **What is one area of your life where you need to trust God with an honest conversation today?**