

CHURCH *of* GOD

A WORLDWIDE ASSOCIATION, INC.

P.O. Box 1009
Allen, TX 75013-0017

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Dear Brethren,

Jeremiah 29:11 is one of the most often-quoted verses on plaques and in religious articles and for good reason. It contains a powerful and positive message, something we don't see a lot of these days.

“For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

Is there anything mankind needs today more than peace? And is there anything more important than hope? The verses that follow are equally powerful:

“Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive” (verses 12-14).

The setting for these verses was Babylon, where the Jews were taken captive in the sixth century B.C. A false prophet by the name of Hananiah prophesied that the Jews would only be in Babylon for two years and then they would return to their homeland (Jeremiah 28:1-4). The Jews rejoiced and were excited to hear that they would soon be returning to the land of Judea. But Jeremiah interrupted their celebrating to give them a very different prophecy—the Jews would return to Judah all right, but it wouldn't be until 70 years had passed, meaning that most of that generation would die in Babylon. Instead of the Jews' returning to Judea within two years, the false prophet Hananiah was dead in less than one year (verse 17).

Hananiah's death and the 70-years prophecy from Jeremiah created deep discouragement for the Jews. To provide some encouragement in this very dark moment, God inspired Jeremiah to write a letter to the captives containing the verses quoted above. Also in this letter Jeremiah gave these specific instructions for the remainder of the captivity:

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace” (Jeremiah 29:4-7).

Imagine yourself in this situation and how discouraged you would be. You thought you would return to your homeland in two years, but now you are told it will be 70 years. Has the Church experienced something similar? Does it affect you and me today?

I recall, while growing up in the Church in the 1950s and 1960s, being taught that the return of Jesus Christ was near. And as we got closer to key dates, such as 1972 and 1975, there was some anxiety and wondering if it would really happen. As a teenager in the Church, graduating from high school in the spring of 1968, I was concerned about my future. Would I get married? Would I graduate from college? Would I have a career? That was almost 50 years ago, and of course, we came to understand that God had a different timetable.

During those years, there was an urgency about the return of Jesus Christ. We see a similar example during the time of the apostles. From what they wrote, we can see that they expected Christ to return in their lifetimes. The apostle Paul was especially clear about this in his first letter to the Thessalonians. They weren't false prophets, nor were they preaching false prophecies as Hananiah did. They simply did not understand the timing of the prophecies about Christ's return. This has been a difficulty for the Church through numerous generations since the first century—knowing what will happen, but not knowing when it will happen.

So what's the point—that we were wrong when we speculated about specific dates? It's true that we were wrong, but that really isn't my point. Rather, I would like to consider what happened to all the people who were part of the Church in those years. It is wrong to make broad, sweeping statements, putting everyone into one basket, but there is no doubt that a number of people became discouraged when they realized the end did not come when they thought it would.

I believe the advice given by Jeremiah is really good advice for all of us. We really don't know when Christ will return. At least two generations have been on the scene since 1968. Will there be more? We don't know. The advice in Jeremiah is timeless and provides us with a blueprint for Christianity in the end time—and, yes, I believe we are living in the end time!

“Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit.” In other words, live your life. Take care of the physical needs of your family. Don't neglect these things because you believe the end is coming—it is coming, but that doesn't justify putting your life on hold.

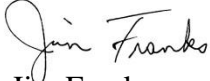
“Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands.” Continue to plan your future—marriage, family and career. Don't abandon your education or your desire for a specific career. It is the servant who is found “so doing” that is rewarded for his effort when the master returns (Matthew 24:46).

“And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.” We should pray for our country and our leaders. What should we pray for? In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 Paul admonishes us to pray for our leaders that “we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.” In addition, we should pray that God's work may not be hindered by the governments of men.

We are not Jews living in captivity in Babylon, but we are Christians living in an evil and violent world, a world that is held captive by Satan himself. We cannot force Christ to come sooner than His Father's schedule calls for. Don't get me wrong, we must be prepared for Christ's return at any time. His return will shock and surprise the world (Matthew 24:42-51). We must not become lethargic, and our message must always have a sense of urgency. We can be eager for Christ's return and urgent in preaching the gospel, and still live life. It seems that in the 1950s and 1960s some simply put life on hold while waiting on Christ to return. So, when He did not return in the 1970s, they were discouraged. Some even became bitter.

Brethren, God has never ordered us to stop living life. He has instructed us to always be ready, to pray without ceasing, to obey His laws, to diligently seek Him and to preach the good news (gospel) of the Kingdom of God in all the world. Christ is coming back to this earth to set up His Kingdom—never doubt that fact! Until that day arrives, do everything you can to please Him by living your life as a bright light in a very dark world. Support the work of preaching the gospel and pray fervently, “Your kingdom come.”

Sincerely, your brother in Christ,


Jim Franks