



Misapplied Scripture: Jeremiah 29:11

By Andrew Olson

“For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.” - Jeremiah 29:11 – NASB

Popular among Evangelicals today is the idea of “claiming” a verse for one’s self, latching on to a passage of scripture and taking ownership of it. A favorite among many is Jeremiah 29:11. And why not? It is an inspiring verse that potently communicates the love of God. But is it legitimate for the average Christian to claim this verse?

As we have done in our previous Misapplied Scripture articles, let’s examine the context of the verse in question. Jeremiah was writing early in the time of exile, not long after the beginning to the Babylonian Captivity, which would last seventy years as a judgment for idolatry. The northern Jewish kingdom of Israel had been invaded and carried off to distant lands by the Assyrians a generation prior, and now the southern kingdom of Judea had suffered a similar fate at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Many false prophets had arisen and were stirring the Jewish population in Babylon to rebellion with the false assurance that such a rebellion was the will of God (v. 8-10), and that the rebels would enjoy divine protection. The Lord, through Jeremiah, exhorted his remnant of true believers to get settled and live their lives where they were, as they would be there for a while. Verse eleven completes the thought begun in verse ten, which says: *“For thus says the LORD, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place.’”*

Our verse in question was a promise that, although times would be tough for the Israelites for the immediate future, God had not forgotten them. His promise would be fulfilled, but they needed to be patient.

Jeremiah 29:11 was written to a specific group of people at a specific time, and it was fulfilled completely, exactly when the Lord promised it would be. Because the promise was fulfilled, the Lord is released from His obligation to it.

Let us illustrate with an analogy. Suppose a man we’ll call Bob buys a house, and moves out of his apartment. He asks his friend Jim to help him move. Jim is a busy guy, but promises to join Bob the following Saturday to help him move to his new home. Saturday comes and Jim keeps his word to Bob and helps him move. Many years later Bob gets a new job on the other side of town. In order to be closer to his new job, he sells his house and buys one closer to work. Would it be proper for Bob to expect Jim to help him move again, based not on the kindness of Jim but on the promise made prior to his previous move? Of course not, Jim fulfilled that promise, and as a result was released from it.

Jeremiah 29:11 does not directly apply to anyone alive today. It was a promise made to Jews living in Babylon in approximately the sixth century before Christ.

That begs the question: then what value does it have to Christians today? A proper application of this verse would be to take comfort that God fulfills His promises. Not only did the Babylonian Captivity last seventy years, just as the Lord (through Jeremiah) said it would, but the remnant in Babylon were in fact sent home to Jerusalem under the reign of Cyrus the Persian (see Ezra 1). When we read of God’s promises that are directed to every believer in the New Testament, we can be assured by the fulfillment of specific promises in the Old Testament that the Lord keeps His word. What an awesome assurance indeed!