

Buzz King  
[buzz@BuzzKing.com](mailto:buzz@BuzzKing.com)  
BuzzKing.com  
303 437 7419

### **Jeremiah 29:11, English Standard Version.**

*<sup>11</sup> 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.*

### **A future and a hope.**

People, especially pastors, and particularly in the U.S., love to use Bible quotes out of context. It causes us to subtly - or even radically - misinterpret them. This passage, Jeremiah 29:11 is often quoted: *<sup>11</sup> 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.* We typically don't read what comes before this. And we don't read what comes after this. We don't think about the context of the quote within the whole of the Book of Jeremiah. This quote is found on people's kitchen walls, on coffee mugs, posted on social media. It appears to offer a powerfully optimistic promise of security, of healing, of safety, of success, of joy to a person who is suffering. It does, in a way, do that. But here is the important point. The "you" in this passage is not an individual. The "you" is very plural. In English, "you" can be singular or plural. In the Hebrew of this passage, the "you" is very definitely plural. Let's look at what, in truth, is being said. To do that we step back a bit.

This is how Chapter 29 of Jeremiah begins:

*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.*

In other words, the chapter tells us about the contents of a letter written by the prophet Jeremiah to the People of God who have been exiled to Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar's army has conquered Judah (which includes Jerusalem), destroyed the magnificent temple, and taken many of its most important citizens far east into slavery in the heart of the pagan Babylonian empire. Jeremiah is giving these people advice on how to survive spiritually. He wants them to continue to dedicate themselves to God, despite being far from the land that God gave them, and despite having lost control of that land. Jeremiah tells them to make a home for themselves in Babylonia. They are to marry, to have children, and to multiply just as the People of God multiplied when they were slaves in Egypt. They must build homes, grow crops, continue practicing the trades which they have learned. Some of them will work on construction projects for Nebuchadnezzar. They are far away, and back home, the Temple is destroyed. Jeremiah tells them that they do not need Israel or a Temple to love and follow God. But they do have the Sacred Writings of the Israelites. They can still study and read them. They are to gather and worship God, and it doesn't matter how

far away they are when they do this. They are no longer people of Israel.

Jeremiah tells them that God will be with them. In the sentences surrounding our very brief passage today, Jeremiah promises that the exile will end someday:

*<sup>10</sup> “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. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. <sup>13</sup> You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup> 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.*

We see that Jeremiah, speaking for God, says that God will come to the people in Babylon and bring them back home. He will restore their fortunes and give them back their promised futures. But notice that God says, through Jeremiah, that he will do this in *seventy years*. Now, the average lifespan back then was probably 45 or so years. They married and had children at a very young age. It’s believed that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was probably about thirteen when she was married. So, imagine the impact of saying to these people, hey, you’re going to come back here, no problem, everything will be fine – *in seventy years*.

In other words, virtually all of them would live out their lives in Babylonia. God was not telling them to go get a magnet and hang this quote on their refrigerators as a reminder that they, as individuals would be returned to the

Promised Land. He was not saying that as individuals they would have their lives returned to them. God was speaking to a people, as God so often does in the Old Testament. Consider this. Ezra was a spiritual leader of the Chosen People while in captivity in Babylon. Remember that ultimately, Persia conquered Babylon, and the king of Persia, Cyrus, let the Israelites go home – if they wanted to. This is what we read about that period in the Book of Ezra. I have edited it heavily:

***1** In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing:*

*<sup>2</sup> “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: <sup>3</sup> Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.”*

*<sup>5</sup> Then rose up the heads of the fathers’ houses of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and the Levites, everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up to rebuild the house of the LORD that is in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And all who were about them aided them with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, with beasts, and with costly wares, besides all that was freely offered.*

This is a bit hard to understand. It says that Cyrus told the Israelites to go back home if they wanted to and to rebuild their temple. It says that some of them went, and that others, who did not choose to go back home, gave silver, gold, animals, and other items to those who were going back, to help them travel home and to help fulfill their mission. In other words, so much time had passed, three generations, approximately, had been born in Babylon – that many now saw Babylon as their home. That’s how much time had passed. Jeremiah had

prophesized that the people of God would be restored – but these words of God referred to the *descendants* of the people who were exiled.

Many of us are children or grandchildren or other fairly recent descendants of immigrants, of people who had very little in life, but who lived with the hope that their children or their children's children would have much better lives than they did. I don't mean that they were unhappy or godless or desperate. I'm speaking in a worldly sense. My father's father served in the trenches in World War I, got hit with mustard gas, and eventually died homeless on the streets of a small city in Quebec. My father served in World War II as a Marine, did not go to college, and spent his life working on cars and selling tires. He spoke four languages. He was a great golfer and bowler; our house was filled with his amateur trophies. He loved to watch NFL games on Sundays. Very late in his life he was able to buy himself a brand new Cadillac. He was an amateur photographer who took beautiful photos of the California coast. But he wanted more for his children. He was astonished and proud when my older sister got a Ph.D. When I became a professor, it was as if the Babylonian exile had only lasted only three weeks. Hope had been fulfilled in such a brief amount of time. Let's look again at today's passage from Jeremiah:

*<sup>11</sup> 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.*

Here is what God is saying: “I have a plan for you, my people of Israel. I will take care of you and protect you from evil. As a people, you have a stunning future. So have hope.” This was a promise made to a people whose lives and those of their children would be lived entirely in captivity.

But this isn't as grim as it sounds. In fact, if we read this correctly, in the context of the Bible as a whole, this is even more powerful than what we might think by reading this quote out of context on a coffee mug. No, God is not promising to make all your wishes come true. God is not promising to make you rich or even to give you good health. God is saying to us that if we are going to live our lives in Babylon, then so be it. Build homes. Marry. Have families. Live our lives, and above all else, live those lives in the name of God. But no matter how low we go, no matter how tough things become, God is still very much in control. God does have a plan. It may be hard to comprehend what God is up to – especially when we find ourselves marching as slaves 700 miles deep into a pagan land. We live in a world today that seems to be on the brink of chaos. There is a major war going on in Europe. Powerful nations that are not our friends are rapidly building up their conventional, stealth, and nuclear weaponry.

There is tremendous conflict in the U.S., growing crime, and a deep layer of poverty. Yet, within all of this, we are to live our lives, love God and each other, and live in joy. Most of all, we are to be confident that God has a plan, and even if we do not personally live to see it entirely fulfilled, it will indeed be fulfilled.

When Jesus came to this planet, he had a message for us. We would have a personal relationship with God. We would inherit the vast spiritual foundation of the people who were called Hebrews in Egypt, Israelites in the Promised Land, and Jews in the time of Christ, and the early Christians who would emerge as the followers of Christ. When we find ourselves in a difficult time, that passage from Jeremiah is now ours. We need to understand it in its ancient context, but it is very much relevant and true for us today. That single verse from Jeremiah, written by a prophet over two and a half millennia ago, tells us that although what we are going through might not end today or even end during our lifetimes, God will get us through it, and through it with a future and with hope. That is the incredible gift of optimism given to us as the People of God.

The great evangelist to the Gentiles, Paul, wrote a letter to the young church in Rome. Many of them lived in the dense slums of Rome. They met in people's homes. He was teaching them the basics of their faith, telling them how to live like People of God. Chapter twelve is often seen as the most important

treatise on how Christians should live ethical lives. In Romans, Paul wants the believers in Rome to know just what it means to be part of a Christian community. Here is a passage that is just as well-known as our passage from Jeremiah. I have included a few verses that come before that very memorable verse:

*<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*

There it is: Rejoice in hope, just as the exiles in Babylon had hope for the ultimate playing out of God's plan. Be patient in tribulation, just as those people so far from their land had to live their faithful lives as best as they could while embedded in a pagan world. And of course, be constant in prayer – stay connected to God, just as the People of God have done for thousands of years. This is our inheritance from the Old Testament, from the words of the prophet Jeremiah, the spokesman for God who knew that God had a plan, a magnificent plan. For us, it is indeed personal. But that personal promise isn't for riches and fame today. It's for the knowledge that our lives are critical to carrying out God's plan for humanity. In the Gospel of Matthew, after the religious authorities of the day begin to plot against Jesus, we are told that Jesus is the fulfillment of a promise made by the ancient prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is quoted, with one extra verse at the end:



*<sup>15</sup> Jesus, aware of this (the plotting against him), withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all <sup>16</sup> and ordered them not to make him known. <sup>17</sup> This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:*

*<sup>18</sup> “Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,  
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.  
I will put my Spirit upon him,  
and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.*

*<sup>19</sup> He will not quarrel or cry aloud,  
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;*

*<sup>20</sup> a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not quench,  
until he brings justice to victory;*

*<sup>21</sup> and in his name the Gentiles will hope.”*

And in his name the Gentiles will hope. That is what has been added to the words of Isaiah in the Gospel of Matthew. As followers of Christ, we do inherit the incredible hope given to the People of God when they were captives and slaves in a foreign, pagan land. We just have to remember, it’s not a hope that God will turn us all into Hollywood celebrities and keep us healthy until we are a hundred and twenty years old. It’s a hope in the eternal plan that God has for all of us. Please pray with me.

*God, give us hope in the future. Let us see through what we experience today and discover the truth of your plan. Let us always remember that the world around us is not some random, chaotic entity. It is your world. You are in control. And because of that, we have a future and a hope. Amen.*