

# CORRECTING FREQUENTLY MISUSED PASSAGES

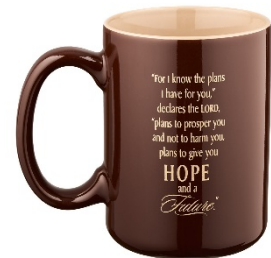
Week 5

## Jeremiah 29:11

**Jeremiah 29:11** ~ ‘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.

### The Abused Interpretation

- This is another of the most well-known and well-loved passages in Scripture...it was Bible Gateway’s second most shared verse in 2013 and is many Christian’s “life verse”
- It is often cited as proof that God wants to do good things for His people, to bless and personally fulfill them
- It is often used at Christian graduation ceremonies, on Christian motivational posters, and all kinds of other “Christian” trinkets including bookmarks, greeting cards, and plaques
- The idea is that we shouldn’t worry because God has a plan for our day and that our future is bright



One of the scariest things in life is the fact that life can be unpredictable and uncertain. You don’t know what will happen next or how a situation will resolve itself in the end. How can we live with life’s uncertainties? How can we function in a world that can not be predicted...We may not know for certain everything our future holds, but we know that God thinks good thoughts towards us, to give us a future and a hope and He holds our future in His hand (Jeremiah 29:11).

<https://thekingdomcorner.wordpress.com/2009/08/10/andy-stanley-life-may-be-uncertain-but-god-isnt/>

The greatest tragedy is not death, but life without purpose...If you have felt hopeless, hold on! Wonderful changes are going to happen in your life as you begin to live it on purpose. God says, “I know what I am planning for you...‘I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future.’”

Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 31

- The way this passage is often cited makes it seem like this verse is all about us
- Failure to understand the context of this passage has resulted in applications which are not necessarily connected with the correct interpretation

## **The Correct Interpretation**

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- Reading Jeremiah 29:11 in its context shows what the passage is truly about and delivers a far more profound truth
- In 597 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah and took 10,000 citizens into captivity into Babylon
- They were uprooted entirely from their homes and transplanted to a completely foreign environment
- They lost everything...the temple was in ruins...Jerusalem was captured...their king was in chains with his eyes gouged out...they had lost all hope that their nation would one day be restored
- But in the midst of that terrible situation, God spoke to them through Jeremiah the prophet who wrote to them and told them to get on with their lives

**Jeremiah 29:4-7** ~ 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; and plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease. 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 have welfare.’

- They were to settle into life in Babylon since they would be there a long time
- So they were to build houses, get married, and have families
- They were also to pray for peace of Babylon since its welfare was closely connected with their welfare
- He also urged them to not listen to the counsel of the false prophets amongst them

**Jeremiah 29:8-9** ~ For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘Do not let your prophets who are in your midst and your diviners deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream. For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD.

- But God promised this wasn’t the end for them

**Jeremiah 29:10** ~ 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.’

- In 70 years they would return home...this is God’s covenant promise to His people Israel
- The promise points to the end of their Babylonian exile in specific terms — 70 years
- This is what God promised them in Jeremiah 25:11-12 ~ ‘This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then it will be when seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,’ declares the LORD, ‘for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it an everlasting desolation.’
- So Israel would be in exile 70 years (605–536 B.C)
- Why did God predict that the Babylonian Exile would last 70 years? → This was the number of years that the people had failed to observe God’s Law of a “Sabbath rest” for the land
- God had decreed that every 7<sup>th</sup> year the land was to lie fallow (Lev. 25:3–5)...the people were not to sow their fields or prune their vineyards
- If the people would fail to follow this command, God would remove them from the land to enforce this “Sabbath rest” (Lev. 26:33–35)

- The writer of 2 Chronicles indicated that the 70-year Babylonian Captivity promised by Jeremiah allowed the land to enjoy its “Sabbath rest” (2 Chron. 36:20–21)
- Therefore the Captivity lasted 70 years probably because this was the number of Sabbath rests that had not been observed for the land
- Thus, the restoration of the exiles to Judah would happen only when God’s 70 years of judgment were completed
- But that restoration would happen in fulfillment with God’s promise...this is “the hope and future” mentioned in vs. 11

**Jeremiah 29:11** ~ ‘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.’

- The plans and welfare in this verse don’t refer to money or material blessings, but physical and spiritual salvation
- God was assuring them that they would eventually be freed
- Thus, this is a promise meant entirely for Israel...this is clear from the following verses

**Jeremiah 29:12-14** ~ ‘Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.’

- The “gathering from all the nations...where I sent you into exile” is a clear reference to Israel
- Interestingly, those who received the promise of vs. 11 likely did not live to experience its fulfillment 70 years later
- So even many of the individual Israelites never saw the fulfillment of this promise
- It was a promise made to Israel nationally
- Furthermore, for those who do claim vs. 11 as an individual promise to them today, how do they know that God is directly speaking to them in vs. 11 but not in vs. 17-19 where God promises further judgment?

**Jeremiah 29:17-19** ~ thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Behold, I am sending upon them the sword, famine and pestilence, and I will make them like split-open figs that cannot be eaten due to rotteness. 18 I will pursue them with the sword, with famine and with pestilence; and I will make them a terror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be a curse and a horror and a hissing, and a reproach among all the nations where I have driven them, 19 because they have not listened to My words,’ declares the LORD, ‘which I sent to them again and again by My servants the prophets; but you did not listen,’ declares the LORD.

- In other words, Jeremiah 29:11 doesn’t guarantee our personal fulfillment and should not be used in an individually focused application
- It is not a universal promise of blessing from God to individual believers in the twenty-first century
- How do we apply this passage then?
- We can be convinced that God does not abandon His people!
- In spite of Israel’s sin, God was faithful to His covenants regarding Israel’s future and His promised Messiah
- Not even exile in Babylon for 70 years could prevent His promises from coming to pass
- Likewise today, His promises to us as New Testament believers about our future glory are irrevocable
- What He has promised us will come to pass because His promises are unshakeable

## Matthew 25:34-46

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**Matthew 25:37-40, 44-46** ~ Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? 38 And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 39 When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ 40 The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me’...44 Then they themselves [unbelievers] also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’ 45 “Then He will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ 46 “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

### The Abused Interpretation

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- Many assume this passage instructs believers to exercise good works as a form of evangelism
- Such “social gospel” advocates argue that at the heart of true Gospel work is doing works of social justice such as feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, and caring for the oppressed
- These acts of mercy play a necessary role in people being saved
- Perhaps this philosophy is best captured by the mantra: “Preach the gospel; if necessary, use words”
- Matthew 25 is used to support this line of thinking because the passage deals with giving food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, clothes to the needy, and help to the oppressed

Matthew 25 has become a favorite passage for many progressive and younger evangelicals. Even in the mainstream media it seems hardly a week goes by without someone referencing Jesus’ command to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked. And few biblical phrases have gotten as much traction as “the least of these.” Whole movements have emerged whose central tenet is to care for “the least of these” a la Matthew 25. The implications – whether increased government spending, increased concern for “social justice,” or a general shame over not doing enough – are usually thought to be obvious from the text.

Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 162.

- Certainly, these activities are not bad to do...in fact, James identifies them as essential to true religion (James 1:27)
- But we must ask: Do those acts of mercy have any role to play in a person’s salvation?
- And: Does our treatment of the poor and oppressed determine our eternity?

### The Correct Interpretation

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- Critical to understanding this passage is determining who “the least of these” really are
- Clearly, from the context they are not society’s poor and downtrodden as many claim
- Instead, “the least of these” refers to other Christians in need...particularly, it refers to itinerant Christian teachers who were/are dependent on the hospitality of fellow believers
- In vs. 45, Jesus used the phrase “one of the least of these” but in vs. 40 he used the more exact phrase “one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them”
- These 2 phrases refer to the same group
- The more complete phrase in vs. 40 should be used to explain the shorter phrase in vs. 45
- Thus, the reference to “one of these brothers of Mine” cannot refer to all of suffering humanity since “brother” is not used that way in the NT
- “brother” is always used in the NT to either refer to a physical-blood brother or to the spiritual family of God
- Since Jesus is clearly not asking us to care only for his physical family, he must be insisting that whatever we do for our fellow Christians in need, we do for Him

- Furthermore, it makes sense to think Jesus is comparing service to fellow believers with service to him rather than to the general poor of humanity
- This is true because it is the body of Christ that represents Christ on earth, not the poor
- Thus, this passage is equating caring for Jesus' spiritual family with caring for Jesus
- The beneficiaries of these good works are not the disenfranchised people of the world

Matthew 25 is certainly about caring for the needy. But the needy in view are fellow Christians, especially those dependent on our hospitality and generosity for their ministry. "The least of these" is not a blanket statement about the church's responsibility to meet the needs of all the poor (though we do not want to be indifferent to hurting people). Nor should the phrase be used as a general cover for anything and everything we want to promote under the banner of fighting poverty. What Jesus says is this: *if we are too embarrassed, too lazy, or too cowardly to support fellow Christians at our doorstep who depend on our assistance and are suffering for the sake of the gospel, we will go to hell.* We should not make this passage say anything more or anything less.

Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 164-165.

- Added to this is the necessary understanding that good works are always described in Scripture as the fruit of salvation, not the root of it
- Such is the case with the good deeds commended in Matthew 25...they are not the basis of entrance into the kingdom
- No amount of good works done in Jesus' name will bring any spiritual benefit if a person has not trusted Christ as Lord and Savior...Salvation is always by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone

**Romans 3:28** ~ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

**Ephesians 2:8-9** ~ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

- True works merely give evidence of the fact that salvation has already taken place

**Ephesians 2:10** ~ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

**James 2:24** ~ You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

- Lastly, it must be stated clearly that words are essential to properly communicate the Gospel

**Romans 10:14** ~ How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?

- A clear presentation of the gospel message (a message which must be expressed with words) must precede true saving faith
- True faith always has content – the holiness of God, truth about sin, judgment, Christ's death and resurrection, saving faith, etc.
- And salvation only comes to those who hear and believe the facts of the gospel

Christ's words in Matthew 25 have *nothing* to do with the social justice [proponents of the social gospel] advocate. Matthew 25:34–46 was never written as a blueprint for salvation through social work nor should it be employed as such. It's not an argument for preaching the gospel through our actions alone, but rather that our actions authenticate the gospel we preach. And those actions must be prioritized towards our suffering fellow believers. So please, care for other believers because Jesus commanded us to. Realize that a lack of care may point to a lack of saving faith. And preach the gospel with words because they're always necessary.

<https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B151009>