

Letters to Jeremiah – Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7 – September 25, 2016

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Dear Jeremiah,

You don't know me. My name is Hannah. I am the wife of one of the priests who was exiled to this awful foreign land after the barbarians charged in and overtook our beloved city of Jerusalem. Life here is ghastly. Back home we were honored and respected. Here we are little more than dogs. Life is hard here. But what would you know? You are back home; we are some 800 miles away. In a strange city, with horrible food. We cannot even understand the language here in Babylon. The people are shocking, as are their customs and religious practices. We try to keep ourselves away from the corruption of these foreigners. But it's hard. We can't get away from them.

We received your letter. It was read at one of the recent gatherings of our people. We have talked of little else since receiving it.

It made no sense to us, really. I am not really sure how to respond to you. I still can't believe we are in exile. Exile. What an ugly word. The word is hard to say and harder to believe. Such a harsh word. Such a harsh reality. It is more than I can bear. How did we end up here? Oh, I know we weren't always the most faithful of people. We turned from God and worshipped idols instead. We neglected the commandments, preferring to do things our own way. But was all that so bad that we find ourselves abandoned by our God, the God of our ancestors? The God of Abraham and Sarah? The God of Isaac and Jacob? In there no forgiveness for our waywardness? Has God completely deserted us? It feels that way.

So, yes, we got your letter. Here we are, exiles in a strange land, longing for words of comfort and assurance and deliverance. Instead, you proscribe the exact opposite. Hunker down, my brothers and sisters. Settle in. Build houses, move in them, plant gardens and eat their produce, take wives and have children, then find spouses for your children. Jeremiah, exactly how long are we going to be here?

You know, we've heard that other prophets are talking about rebellion. Other prophets are saying this exile won't last. They claim to be speaking God's word. Yet you tell us they are wrong. That they are misinformed. That they have not heard the true message of God. Honestly, Jeremiah, I would much rather listen to them. They offer an easier way. I don't like the idea of having to stay here. I don't like the idea of one day having to die here.

You told us in your letter to pray for the people here, for these Babylonians. But what are we supposed to pray for? Their welfare, for their shalom, for wholeness? Why would we do that? Are they not our captors? Why should we pray for them? We are here not because we choose

to be here. We are here because Babylon is stronger than we are. Jeremiah, tell me truthfully, are we still God's people?

Peace to you, Hannah

Dear Jeremiah,

It's me again. Hannah. The priest's wife. Did you receive my letter? It's been about six months since I sent it. I wanted to write again to let you know what's happening here in Babylon. I have tried really hard to understand your letter to us. At first it simply made no sense to me at all. I was still so angry and bitter by everything that had happened to us. I suppose I was still in shock. I mean, how does one adjust to being forcefully taken from one's home and dragged miles and miles away into a strange country, away from our friends and families.

I was so angry with God. I lashed out at my husband and children. I couldn't stand to even look around at this place we are living in. The homes, the trees, the weather, the food. It all seemed so wrong. Everything was a reminder to me of this horrible exile. Of how God abandoned us. Sometimes I would burst into tears without warning. I couldn't help it. All this pain inside me had to come out. Other times I would wake up in the middle of the night, frightened and alone, even though my husband was right there next to me. Most times I could not get back to sleep, tossing and turning all night.

But finally the anger lessened. Finally, I began to realize that holding onto the past would simply drag me down deeper into this despair I felt. I needed to come to terms with the reality of the situation. I needed to let go of the past, and start to move on. And as easy as that might sound, it certainly wasn't.

I started to really look at my surroundings. I noticed a woman who lives on the next road over. She's Babylonian, and she makes no secret of her feelings toward us. She glares any time we come near her. Sometimes she screams at us to go home, to get out of her city. I wish we could. Then I found out why she is so angry. Her only son had been a soldier. He had been part of the army that destroyed our beloved city of Jerusalem. He died there. Now I understand. A woman, aching over the loss of her beloved child. I guess in some ways she is in her very own exile.

And then there is a Jewish man. I don't remember him from back home, but here he is practically our neighbor. He is a young man, strong – with a young wife and several small children. But something's wrong. His health has been failing the past few weeks. The doctors don't know what to do. They fear the worst.

Another man, this one Babylonian. He is an old man, frail, unsteady on his feet. He wears tattered clothing and roams the streets. From time to time, he cries out in terror, but no one is near him when he does this. He talks to the air, air if someone were standing next to him. I feel pity for him. His eyes have the look of a wild animal. I don't think he understand who or where he is. Every day when I see him coming, I leave some bread for him to eat. He devours it greedily, and moves on down the road. Some of the local children tease him and throw stones. I wish they wouldn't.

Jeremiah, when we first got here, all I could do was think of my own problems, my own exile. But as I look at the people around me, I am starting to understand the many people face different types of exile in their own lives. Debilitating illness, death of a loved one, broken relationships, poverty, addictions. I am starting to gain some perspective. I am starting to see that we humans are connected to one another. It's not just Jew or Babylonian. We are living here together, and we all have issues in our lives. You said to pray for the welfare of our captors. The welfare of this city in which we now live. The reason you gave is that in its welfare, we will find our own. When they prosper, we prosper. When they hurt, we hurt. We are interconnected. We are related.

So if I pray to God for their welfare, will God hear me? Is God here in Babylon?

Well, that's all for now. I must go out to weed the garden and tend to the new fruit trees that my husband planted.

Peace to you, Hannah

Dear Jeremiah, I hope you are well. This is Hannah again. It's been several months since my last letter to you. I wanted you to know the news here in Babylon. As you know, I had been struggling with your appeal that we Jews in exile should pray for the welfare of these Babylonians. I still could not understand why.

But then, not long ago, I was gathered with some of the Jewish women. We were studying the scripture together. It happened to be the story of Joseph, who was the favorite of his father Jacob. Jacob had given him a beautiful coat of many colors. Joseph's brothers were jealous of their father's affection for him, and they sought to do him harm. They sold him into slavery, and he ended up in Egypt. Now Joseph could have been full of hatred for his brothers and loathing for his captors, but he chose a different path. Instead, Joseph sought the welfare of the Egyptians, and eventually became a successful man. And over the years of his exile, God was able to work through Joseph in the lives of others. When the time of famine struck his homeland, his brothers came to Egypt in search of food. Joseph saved his family and many others from starvation.

This story of Joseph opened my eyes. I think now I understand what you meant in your letter to us, Jeremiah. I think I know why you asked us to pray for the welfare of this city.

We didn't ask to be here. We didn't ask to be in this situation, so far from our homes. But this is where we are now. No amount of fussing or fighting is going to change that. The past is done. And nothing can change what happened. We can't wish it away. We have to come to terms with the reality of this situation. It doesn't mean that God has left us. God isn't stuck back in Jerusalem. God is here with us in Babylon. Even when it seems like God doesn't hear us or doesn't care what happens to us, the truth is that God never left us.

God is with the Babylonian woman who lost her son, the soldier who died in Jerusalem. God is with that young father who is dying of some unknown disease. God is with that old man who hears voices and lives in the confines of his distorted mind. God is with us, each one of us, in our own exile.

Jeremiah, you gave us hope in that letter you wrote to us. I didn't see it at first. But the hope is there. Hope for a future. Because you told us to pray for the welfare of this city. Welfare, peace, shalom. That's a word that is bursting with hope. God wants wholeness for all people. God cares about the welfare of all people. We are connected to one another. We find our strength in solidarity and in community. When we pull away from each other, we find loneliness and despair. When we put up walls between ourselves and others, then we miss out on the wholeness that God wants us to experience.

Maybe these Babylonians aren't so bad after all. They're different, yes. But really, not so different. Some of the women have begun to smile at me as I walk to the marketplace. Some of the children have wanted to play with my children. I've been holding back. But maybe it will be alright. Some of the men have asked my husband what he does as a priest. They have questions about our God. They really seem interested.

It's starting to make sense – the welfare of the Babylonians, the welfare of the Jews. It's really the same, isn't it? That's what you wanted us to understand when you wrote us that letter. God didn't abandon us when we went into exile. God is here with us, in the darkest of circumstances, even this strange place. Well, I suppose it's not so strange anymore. I suppose now I need to learn to call it home.

I think I'll close for now. I need to go harvest some of the vegetable from our garden. And I think I'll go ask some of my Babylonian neighbors if they'd like to have some.

Goodbye, Jeremiah. And may God's peace be with you.

Signed, Hannah.