

Jeremiah 29:11: For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

It’s a Good Thing God Knows

Do you ever daydream about the future? As a parent, I’ve thought about this day – and daydreamed about the days that come next for my son. When I graduated from high school and from college and from the seminary, I had so many dreams – a perfect family, years of ministry that would bring many people to Christ, travel and adventure and making a difference in life until God called me home. Does that sound like any of your daydreams? You aren’t all going into the ministry, so your dreams might look a little different. But don’t you have them? Aren’t they generally good things? Blessings? Successes?

Do you think it will really happen that way? It didn’t always for me. I’ve been married for 25 years and I have been truly blessed. I wouldn’t trade my wife or my children for anything. But it hasn’t all been rainbows and lollipops. There have been bumps and bruises along the way. I’ve also been in the ministry for 25 years, and you know what I’ve discovered? I’m not the second coming of the apostle Paul. There have been dark days for me and there will be for you, too. And that’s why the words you’ve chosen for your graduation verse are such a good choice. God spoke them in very dark days. Even if you don’t have days like that, the words he spoke through Jeremiah still apply. These words are all about God’s plan for his children. If I had known about the dark days that were coming in my ministry, would I be a pastor today? If I had known about the bumps and bruises and the hurts that were coming, would I have tried to avoid those things and in the process robbed myself of the grace of God that only works in hurt and sorrow? I think I would’ve been afraid to face some of the things God had in store in me if I had known they were coming. Thankfully, we don’t know. **But it’s a good thing God knows.**

I.

Does that seem a little dark for your graduation? I’m sorry, but you picked the verse and that’s what it’s talking about. When God spoke these words, the last king of Judah was on the throne. King Nebuchadnezzar had deposed the previous king and dragged him off into exile, along with many people from Judah. God had Jeremiah write those exiles a letter. You know what his message was? You’re not coming back. Build houses and settle down. Marry your children off, because they’re gonna be old men and women when they see Jerusalem again – in 70 years. When they do come back, the temple will be gone. The city walls will be broken down. The houses will be burned out and empty. That was the letter where Jeremiah wrote these famous words: **“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”**

All their hopes and dreams were shattered. They probably didn’t graduate from high school, but when they got married, when they had their first child, when they started farming their own land or opened their own shop, they were probably just as full of hopes and dreams as you young people are today. When those evil days came, they needed to be picked up off the emotional floor. How did God pick them up? With a rich gospel promise. “I have plans to prosper you and not to harm you. I have plans to give you hope and a future.” Now, I think we could understand if they had trouble seeing exile as prospering them and if they thought that never going home again wasn’t really hope or a future. But God said that is exactly what it was. What could he possibly mean by that?

Well, what is our hope? What is our future? It’s heaven, isn’t it? I think I speak for every parent here when I say that our greatest hope for you graduates is that you will reach heaven. That’s God’s hope for you, too. It was God’s hope for Old Testament Israel. God moved those exiles out of Jerusalem to save them from the coming destruction. They didn’t live through the final siege and the starvation in the city. They didn’t see the blood run in the streets or their friends cut down. But even more than that, God moved them to Babylon to purify their faith. Jerusalem had become a spiritual cesspool. Even the priests in the temple of the Lord were indulging in idol worship and defending false doctrine. All that sin and rebellion brought God’s wrath down on Judah.

But then came the exile. After that, the return. When you look at Israel in Jesus' day and compare it to Israel in the Old Testament, they're worlds apart, spiritually. Jesus never had to warn his people not to worship Baal or to sacrifice their children to Molech. God sent those Jewish people into exile to preserve their faith. Then he brought them back so that they could continue God's plan to send Jesus into this world. When the time was right, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The Son of God grew up as a carpenter's son in Nazareth. The Word made Flesh preached and taught and did miracles. Then the Author of Life laid down his life, only to take it up again. All that was part of God's plan for those exiles. God preserved their faith and he sent his Son through their descendants, so that those exiles could reach eternal life.

What does that mean for you today? I hope and pray that ever one of you has a wonderful life. I hope and pray that every one of you is blessed behind my ability to tell it. But I know that all of you will hurt sometimes. I know that most of you will go through periods of darkness and sadness. I know that many of you will feel confused and lost sometimes and maybe, guys like me won't do a good job of helping you. Maybe we pastors and we parents will fail you. But God's promise will still stand. God knows you personally. He knows the plans he has for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, even if you never land a great job, even if you crash and burn in college, even if you get sick and die. God has plans to give you hope and a future.

Emma and Joe were in my catechism class five and six years ago. I hope they remember what I taught them about the word "hope" in the Bible. When God says hope, he doesn't mean "maybe." It's not like when your car breaks down in the middle of nowhere and your cell phone is out of charge and you say, "I really hope that someone comes by." In the Bible hope means expectation. God has made a promise to you and you can expect it to be kept. God has given you a future. And yes, it is full of blessings already in this life because he does love you. You have been given so many gifts and there is so much joy still to come for you. But there is also hurt and loss and sadness. That's part of life on this earth.

And even if all your dreams fail, God still has a future for you: you will live with him in heaven. You will rise from the dead and live in a perfect world forever. You will do those things because Jesus lived in your place. He erased your sins with his perfect life. And because he died and paid for everything that ever haunts your conscience. His blood washes away the words and the actions that you wish you could forget. He rose and you are forgiven. You are loved. You are holy in his sight. And you have an eternal future with him. **It's a good thing God knows the future he has planned for you. We would get lost in all the evil we see.** But God steers us through to heaven.

II.

How did God's people get into such trouble? They had every possible advantage. They had the word of God in its truth and purity. They had God holding his hand over them. They had his promises that if they were just faithful to him, their crops would be so abundant that they would have to throw away last year's harvest to make room for this year's; five of them would chase a hundred of their enemies; they would live in peace and prosperity. But generation after generation turned their back on God. You can talk about all kinds of historical reasons for that. But at their core, they had the same problem all sinners have: pride. They thought they were smart enough and gifted enough to choose which of God's commands to obey and so they went through the motions of honoring God but they never really took to heart how much they needed his love.

Today, I am blessed to have my youngest child graduate from high school. When my wife and I look back over all that he has accomplished here, I'm sure we feel the same way that all you parents feel when you look at what your son or daughter has done over the last four years. We are all proud of what you graduates have accomplished. We have reveled in your triumphs in the classroom and on the athletic field and on the stage. We have given thanks to God for the extraordinary children he has given us.

Many of us will celebrate this day by giving you gifts. But the greatest gift any of us could give you is Jesus. The gospel that we've tried to teach you is what will make the real difference in your lives. Today, you finish high school. But in just a few months, you're going to start college. You're going to find jobs and eventually start careers. And do you know what's going to be true in all those situations? People will judge you by the effort you put in and by the grace that you show under pressure. People are going to tell you to dig deep inside of yourself and find the strength to overcome whatever obstacles you face. And even if you go to MLC, people are going to expect you to be disciplined and responsible and to apply yourself, if you want to succeed. And that is the way the world works.

But no matter how extraordinary and gifted and disciplined you graduates are, the real source of God's power in your life will always be the good news about Jesus. It's going to be easy to forget that in a world that constantly idolizes the great god "me." Without a miracle of the Holy Spirit we would all think exactly the same way. We would try to dig ourselves out of every difficulty. We would try to stand on our own and believe that we could do it, too. So God knocks us down sometimes to remind us where our real help is: in him. In the Savior who loved you so much that he laid down his life to rescue you. In the Savior who had all power to conquer death for you. In the Savior who sits at the right hand of God and controls all things for you – to do you good, not harm, to give you hope and a future. **It's a good thing God knows the future that he has planned for you. We would forget to base our faith on his promises.**

So he reminds us. Day after day. By knocking us down and picking us up. By giving us blessings we never imagined. By making some of our dreams come true exactly the way we hoped for and by denying others and by fulfilling still others in ways we never could've imagined. By feeding us with his word and his sacrament. By forgiving our sins and answering our prayers. By sending us parents who love us and point us to Jesus and pastors and teachers who hold our Savior before our eyes. God knows the plans he has for you. And it's a good thing, too. Amen.