

Jeremiah 29: 1 - 14 Past imperfect – Present conditional – Future perfect

If you're a house owner or even if you live at all in a house, you've probably had people knocking at your door, they introduce themselves very nicely (I'm Bob from such and such a company) and the next thing they say is ... 'Don't worry, I'm not here to sell you anything'. Well, you know all too well that in fact they **are**.

I want you to imagine two different people coming and knocking at your door

– the first one comes, and says 'Hello I'm Bill from Talkaboutyourfuture.com. Don't worry I'm not here to sell you anything. I just thought I'd better come and tell you, some millionaire has just bought up all the land round here and he's kicking you and your family out on the street; he owns your house, you've got nothing; in fact he's in control of your children too – they have to go and work for him; you've got no choice or say in the matter – it's going to happen.' The man then walks away, you stare after him dumbfounded.

You close the door, and are still wondering what's hit you, when a second knock comes at the door; there's a smartly dressed man standing there, a broad grin on his face. 'Hi! I'm Steve from Pleasant futures Ltd. Don't worry – I'm not here to sell you anything. I'm here to tell you about your future,' he says. 'It's looking fine for you – you've got a wonderful house with a very pleasant garden, and I can see behind you, you have a lovely family. You have enough to eat and enough money for a lot of luxuries – you have no worries.' He leaves, and you close the door behind him.

Which man do you listen to? Their messages are completely at odds with each other? Which message do you take to be the true assessment of the situation? I would suggest that most of us would listen to the second man – everything's fine. Why? Because it's what we **want** to hear. It's what we would **like** to be true – nobody in their right mind would want the first man's message to be true, would they?

This is the situation God's people the Israelites were in – Jeremiah was telling them things that they didn't want to hear, so they didn't listen to the message God had given to him. They listened to other people instead, who **did** tell them what they wanted to hear.

Let's quickly set the scene and say a bit about the **Background** to this chapter 29 of the book of Jeremiah –

Who was this Jeremiah? What was his message?

Well, he was a prophet, a man who God used to bring His message to God's people in Israel and he worked tirelessly for 40 years about 600 years before Jesus was born. He told the Israelites about coming judgement, the coming destruction of Jerusalem and that they would be taken into Babylon. Hardly a message the Israelites wanted to hear – so they didn't listen, but these things happened in Jeremiah's lifetime. He warned the people not to ignore God, but to turn from their sins and seek God. In verse 19 of the second chapter of Jeremiah we read "Your wickedness will punish you; your backsliding will rebuke you. Consider then and realise how evil and bitter it is for you when you forsake the Lord your God and have no awe of me," declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty."

Our lives, like theirs, are nothing if we neglect God, if we have no awe or respect or regard for the things of God. Today we aren't so different to the Israelites, are we? When will we learn? When will we listen to the message that really matters?

So what about

God's people – where are they now?

In Chapter 29, verse 4 we read "This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon". So they're in exile, far from their own land, no longer enjoying the freedoms they once enjoyed in the care of their God.

I'd like to split this morning's message into three, and as a teacher of languages, I want to use linguistic headings that I understand, and I hope you do too – very simply the Past, the Present and the Future.

Firstly: Past imperfect: (sign on front of pulpit)

Let's look firstly at the immediate past of the Israelites – what has just happened recently to them?

Do you remember the old school reports we used to get, and the comments we often used to read, mine were usually meaningless comments like 'Satisfactory' or 'Sound' or 'Good progress'. I often read 'timid' – I didn't know what it meant, I was too shy to ask!

Yours might have been better or worse comments than those, I'll leave that to your memory – I guess some were real corkers (mentioning no names). Israel's comments would read 'Could do better – they don't listen properly, they often misunderstand what they're supposed to be doing, and so they get things wrong. Either that or they disobey instructions.'

God's people have rejected God's laws. They are the people that God had special affection for – he led them out of captivity in Egypt; while they were in the desert, he provided food from heaven for them, he gave them water from a rock; he led them to a good and spacious land flowing with milk and honey, we read in Exodus chapter 3. God gave them victory over their enemies, He protected them, He gave them laws so that they could live secure and yet free lives, in relationship with Himself, the Creator of all things – don't you think they would be happy to go along with this? To be looked upon with favour and be blessed by the all-powerful God? Surely, they would cherish this - wouldn't you? Wouldn't they do everything they could to maintain this? Wouldn't they want to please their loving God?

Let me give you another example: if you were in prison – fair cop, you did something wrong. Then someone comes along, buys you out of jail, takes you to his millionaire pad in Chelsea, or Worthing; he says all this is yours – enjoy it; he feeds you, he provides clothes for you and says as long as you want it, you can have it. Would you turn round to him and say, 'No thanks, I'll stay here in prison – it's got four nice walls, and the warders are all very pleasant. I guess not.

Surely the Israelites would want to continue living in God's blessing, wouldn't they? Well, apparently not.

We read God speaking to his people in chapter 3 and verse 19 “How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation. I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me. But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel.”

God wanted his people to have a wonderful, close relationship with Him; but they turned their back on Him, they ignored Him, they went their own way, they did their own thing. After all God had done for them ...

They ignored His message to turn from their wrongdoings and wrong thinking – they preferred to listen to the men who brought them messages they wanted to hear, that God would love them even if they neglected Him, because He was their God. They thought that because God is a God of love, surely he wouldn’t punish them for their sins.

But we wouldn’t be like the Israelites – we would live according to what God wanted, wouldn’t we? If he gave us so much blessing, provided for us, protected us as his special people, we wouldn’t ignore that, surely? Would we?

Just hang on a minute – that is exactly what we have all done, until we become Christians: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life,” we read in John’s gospel; Jesus said “I am the Bread of Life, he who comes to me shall not hunger”; To those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, God has given them the right to become children of God (John 1). God **has** provided salvation for us in Jesus – but we ignored him – we went our own way. We listened to the false words of those who said ‘Live for now – you’ll be OK.’ Many people out there – let’s face it, most people out there are doing exactly what the Israelites did. Why?

I’ve got bad news for the Israelites, and anyone else who thinks that God will not punish sin because He’s a God of love – He is a God of justice, and He has to punish sin – He doesn’t enjoy punishing sin, because He **is** a God of love. But he has to. The Israelites learned – as they so often did – the hard way.

Past Imperfect – God’s people had listened to false words, had false dreams, they’d turned away from their God.

Are **you** sure you're listening to the right message? Are you relying upon the good things you are doing to outweigh the bad? Are you relying upon the love of God without reckoning with the anger of God at your wrongdoing and neglect of Him?

Secondly - Present conditional: (vv. 5-9) (sign on front of pulpit)

Verse 4 of our reading in Chapter 29, tells us that the Israelites are now in exile. God is still their God, they are still His people, but they are in exile from their land.

They are in exile – God tells them to get used to it. God allowed them to be put in exile. There's nothing they can do about it now – they just have to get on with it. We read in verse 10 that they are going to be there in exile for seventy years, now that's a pretty long time, isn't it?

God says it's going to be a long time – they are to get used to the idea. Let's read from verse 5 – 7:

God tells them through Jeremiah that for the present, they are there in Babylon for the next 70 years. But they aren't there to be miserable, and sit moping in the corner feeling all sorry for themselves, oh no. They are to build houses, settle down, grow their own food, have families and increase in number. They are to **enjoy** life in exile, although living miles away from the land flowing with milk and honey. They are even told to seek the peace and prosperity of their captors – does that sound strange?

How and why are they able to do this? How can they enjoy living in exile, away from the prosperity and freedoms they used to enjoy so recently? How is this possible?

Well, the answer to that question is simple - because God has placed them there – God is still their loving God, He is still the God of Israel – **they** have turned from Him, He hasn't turned from them.

Let me tell you, if you are trusting in God for your salvation, He is your God no matter what situation you find yourself in – He has allowed you to be placed there – He will keep you safe in His salvation, Paul writes in his letter to the Romans “nothing will separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God has not said that we won’t experience hard times, but that he will get us through them. There may be temptations, but Paul said in his 1st letter to the Corinthians “God is faithful, He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.” Trust God – make the best of your present situation – God has allowed it, if we recognise that God is all powerful, surely we must recognise that He has planned for us to be in the situations we are in now – trust God. If He is at work in your life, He is watching over you.

But there is a warning in verses 8 – 10; do not let your course be altered – do not be deceived by messengers bringing false dreams. Make sure the things you are obeying are God’s instructions, test everything by what is written in the Bible. Has God really said it? Is it consistent with what is in the Bible? If not, you must discount it.

Present conditional – God’s people can enjoy the present situation no matter how bad it gets – if they recognise that He has allowed it to happen.

Finally - Future perfect (Read vv. 10-14) (sign on front of pulpit)

But what about the future? What will happen after the 70 years of exile? Is it more of the same for the Israelites?

(Read the I wills again)

Notice the “I will ... – You will ...” – there’s no maybe or perhaps, no ifs or buts. God says “I **will** come to you and fulfil my gracious promise ... I **will** carry you back from captivity”. How can God be so certain? How does He know this will happen? He says in verse 11 “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” God has a plan for his people – both then and now – wonderful plans, plans to prosper, not to harm, to give hope and a future. He has a plan for your life, a plan to prosper you, if you are his child. What a wonderful message.

God says in verse 14 “I will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” I will bring you back to where you **should be** – You will call upon me, come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. This is where you should be. You should be calling to me your God, you should be praying to me – and I **will** listen to you, God says, I will hear your prayer. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I **will** be found by you, declares the Lord.

Oh listen to this message, people. It was a message to the Israelites then, but it’s just as vital a message for today. God says “When you call to me, when you seek me with all your heart, I will listen, I **will** be found by you. I will bring you back to the place where **I** want you to be.” He says “Because my son Jesus died on the Cross to bring forgiveness for your sins, there is no price to pay, Jesus bore it all. You can now be in relationship with Almighty God, if you cry to him with all your heart. Seek Him and you **will** find Him. That’s his promise, that’s his plan for your life, his plan to prosper you.

“When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you declares the Lord”

The past may have been imperfect, the present may have conditions, but the future will be perfect if you are where God wants you to be. If you are trusting in Jesus and his work of salvation on the Cross and his rising again – as we were remembering last Sunday – you can look forward to eternal life where God wants you to be, where you are meant to be.

(Prayer)

(When we walk with the Lord)

I'd just like to finish by reading from the 1st letter to Peter 1:3 -9.